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**Exploring Managers and Management: The Squeezed Middle in  
the English Post-Compulsory Education Sector**

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A thesis submitted to the University of Warwick (Centre for Lifelong  
Learning) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy

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The Purple Room

Connor's Café, Luton

Riseley Village Shop



## **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by me and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

Peter Wolstencroft, March 2017, reconfirmed May 2018





## **Abstract**

The recent history of the post-compulsory education sector in England has been shaped by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) and the subsequent period which led to the 'incorporation' of colleges. This move towards a quasi-market economy created a change in culture for those charged with leading and managing in the sector.

At the centre of this change were the middle managers. In most cases, middle managers were promoted from a lecturing job into a role that involved bridging the gap between the demands of senior managers and the realities of the classroom.

Building on original work by Briggs (2006) and Busher and Harris (1999), this research looks at the role of middle managers and the environment in which they operate. It focuses specifically on the transition lecturers make when first appointed to the role and how they are supported. Self-identity is a key theme running through the work and it seeks to look at how this changes as lecturers move into management.

Using a series of semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire, the research identifies how middle managers often 'fall' into the role through ad hoc recruitment procedures that rarely reflect acknowledged good practice. The support and training given was also found to be minimal and the work/life balance of the majority of participants is skewed heavily in favour of work. Whilst there was some shared understanding of what management meant to participants, each individual manager had a different approach to the challenges management posed.

Middle managers recounted four dimensions that helped to explain their role; these were all influenced by the philosophical driver that encapsulated their beliefs, values and what they viewed as important. The dimensions (which were named moulded, resilient, independent and human) were defined by the degree of interaction managers had with people and systems. The word dimension was used to describe a social and cultural space occupied by the manager. Sometimes these existed as physical spaces but in most cases, these were merely the theoretical settings in which managers were located when performing their role.



## **Glossary of Key Terms and Abbreviations Used**

AoC	Association of Colleges. The body that represents the majority of colleges in the sector.
ATL	Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Trade union that represents many teachers, lecturers and managers within education. The managers' section is known as AMiE.
BELMAS	British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society. An organisation that looks to inform policy and practice in education through research.
CPD	Continual Professional Development. The requirement for a minimum of 30 hours CPD per year was a part of the original QTLS (q.v.) qualification.
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages. A key part of many colleges' remit and the scene of many arguments over the funding of colleges.
ETF	Education and Training Foundation. This is the government-funded body that aims to promote the sector and improve standards of teaching and learning.
FENTO	Further Education National Training Organisation. The forerunner of LSIS (q.v.), FENTO was responsible for writing the first set of professional standards for the sector.

Further and Higher Education Act (1992)	The Act that introduced a quasi-market into the sector and led to the incorporation of colleges (q.v.)
Incorporation	The process whereby colleges were required to move from Local Education Authority control to autonomy over decision making.
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators. Often used to measure success within the sector.
LLUK	Lifelong Learning UK. An independent sector skills council that promoted professional development and CPD (q.v.) within the sector. It ceased to exist in 2011.
LSC	Learning and Skills Council. The forerunner of the SfA (q.v). It ceased to exist in 2010.
LSIS	Learning and Skills Improvement Service. A not-for-profit body set up to improve attainment in the sector. It ceased to exist in 2013.
Ofsted	The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. They inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages, including those attending further education.
Performativity	An approach that stresses the necessity to meet KPIs (q.v.) in order to measure success. The process is often linked to the adoption of a compliance-based style of managing.

PGCE	Post (or Professional) Graduate Certificate in Education. The most recognised teacher education qualification in the sector.
QTLS	Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills. This was the status that was brought in for lecturers joining the profession. Prior to the interim Lingfield report (Lingfield, 2012), it was compulsory for new lecturers; now it is advisory.
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status. The status that is required by most teachers within the compulsory sector in order for them to be deemed to be 'qualified'.
SFA	Skills Funding Agency. The body that administers funding for the sector.
Silver Book	The collective name for the terms and conditions for lecturers before the advent of incorporation.
SVUK	Standards Verification UK. A body responsible for endorsing initial teacher education. It ceased to exist in 2011.
Strategic compliance	A term used by Shain and Gleeson (1998) that seeks to explain how managers selectively comply with requests from senior managers.
UCET	Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers. A national forum that promotes initial teacher education to the government.
UCU	University and College Union. The largest trade union in the sector.



## **Chapter 1: Setting the Scene – Managing in an Ever-Changing World and Defining the Undefinable**

### **1.1 Background to the sector**

The reputation of the post-compulsory education sector as the ‘Cinderella’ sector (Baker, 1989) is well established in the literature (Randle and Brady, 1997; Spenceley, 2007). This ‘neglected mittelkind’ (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2012) is currently experiencing another period of continuing instability that recalls much of the evidence provided to the House of Commons Select Committee when the last major review of the sector took place in 2006. The history of the sector, described as a sequence of ‘feast or famine’ (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006), is defined in the modern era by the process of incorporation that occurred after the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). This event, a consequence of which has been a perceived shift for participants from the educational to the managerial paradigm, has had a significant impact on the working lives of tutors and managers within the sector. In turn, this has impacted on the experience of the learner, who is a key, if oft neglected, player in the sector.

The primacy of the economic imperative, as described by Hyland and Merrill (2003), which was at the heart of incorporation, changed the fundamental nature of post-compulsory education. This has been defined as the belief in ‘...the efficacy of the free market’ (Simmons, 2008:429) and is characterised by the neo-liberalist principles of free enterprise, free market and measurement of success in quantitative terms (Simmons, 2008). For colleges of further education, this has meant that their success is defined in narrow, quantitative terms that enable measurements to be made and comparisons to take place between different providers. This use of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as a measurement of success has led to a culture shift within the sector that, it has been argued, has led to the rise of a ‘compliance culture’ (Silverman, 2008) that altered the relationship between teachers and managers to one of control rather than support. In effect, the measurement of a successful college is now prescribed in exact terms rather than defined in the rather more general phrases that were used before, such as ‘strong support’ or ‘community focused’. Many writers have defined this changing relationship and the



impact it has had on staff within the sector. Ball (2003) talks about the ‘terrors of performativity’ within the sector, which have ensured that tutors are now viewed as ‘trusted servants rather than...empowered professionals’ (Avis, Kendal and Parsons, 2003:239). This change has ensured that the role of the traditional head of department has evolved into one that encompasses financial, managerial and performance aspects as well as the established educational imperative.

Whilst this shift is often viewed in negative terms (Ball, 2003), it is important to note that the switch from pre-incorporation local authority control to the post-1992 quasi-market approach should not be viewed in an overly one-dimensional manner. Simmons (2014) argues that much of further education has always existed outside local authority control and so any insistence that the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) represented a seismic shift is a simplistic argument. Indeed, he also argues that the introduction of control mechanisms was needed as a counterpoint to some of the practices within the sector. These practices were enshrined within the ‘Silver Book’ which listed contractual terms and conditions that were considerably more advantageous than those of schoolteachers and also ensured that colleges could effectively only operate during term time as lecturers’ conditions included a guarantee of a long summer holiday as well as other holidays similar to those in the compulsory sector.

This theme of a sector that is often perceived as being a poor relation (the Cinderella of the education sector) but one that is rallying against this is taken up by Daley, Orr and Petrie (2015) when they suggest that the sector is fighting back against the perception that it is the downtrodden relative of the education sector: ‘it is time...for FE’s cinders to be reignited’ (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015). Despite this positivity about the future, it is important not to neglect the current state of the sector. Coffield et al. (2014) argued against a straitjacketed approach for lecturers and warned against restricting freedoms for lecturers in the quest for approval from KPIs, whilst in an earlier piece, but one that is still relevant today, Anderson, Barton and Wahlberg (2003) argue that the sector can be viewed as having IADHD – Institutional Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder. Given the reductions in funding (Tickle, 2014) and constant changes in government priorities (Mager, 2010), this seems like

an apt description for a sector that is viewed as needing to be highly responsive to the environment in which it operates.

The support afforded to new tutors within the sector, often seen as the responsibility of middle managers, has been well documented (Avis and Bathmaker, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Spenceley, 2007; Kidd, 2010) and it is clear that new entrants to the sector face a number of structural and support problems (Wallace, 2002) that impact on their work. Notable amongst these are problems connected to support, a lack of recognition that new entrants often require a reduced teaching load and a prevailing culture that stresses results above all else (Wallace, 2002). The title of Wallace's article, 'No good surprises', provides a clear indication of the initial experiences of new entrants. The introduction of Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status in 2007 was designed to ease these problems but the findings of the interim Lingfield report (Lingfield, 2012) suggest that problems persist:

Only about 15 per cent of lecturers have attained 'fully qualified' status or have committed themselves to the programme of post-qualification study and supervised practice required to achieve it. QTLS/ATLS has not become a universal full licence to practise and a driver of teaching excellence.

(Lingfield, 2012:14)

Indeed, the removal of QTLS as a required component for new teachers' development can be seen as an acknowledgement that this legislative approach has failed to have the necessary impact on support for new tutors. By the time the awarding body, the Institute for Learning (IfL), was absorbed into the newly formed Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in 2014, it was estimated that there were only 9,000 members of the organisation. This represents even less than Lingfield's estimate. Recent attempts by the ETF to introduce a new 'Advanced Status' qualification suggest that there is still a recognition that support and a clear qualification structure for lecturers remains a problem (TES, 2016).

## **1.2 The role of the middle manager in the sector**

The role of middle managers within further education colleges is traditionally viewed as an ‘ideological buffer between senior managers and lecturers through which market reform is filtered in the FE workplace’. (Gleeson and Shain, 1999:462). This inevitably places the managers on the frontline of an ongoing battle between the educational paradigm and the managerial paradigm that prevails once the economic necessity of meeting KPIs is made paramount (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). Training and support for the middle management role is often limited (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) in contrast with the structure offered to senior managers (BIS, 2007) and hence these middle managers often feel undersupported and underprepared for their role (Briggs, 2001). This feeling of a lack of support is exacerbated by the lack of support structures that are put in place to manage the transition (Briggs, 2001). In addition to this, the further education sector is often seen as a vehicle for the introduction of governmental priorities (Bathmaker and Avis, 2005) and this adds to the image of a sector that need to be constantly responsive. A recent example of this has been the increased use of further education colleges to teach higher education programmes. This has necessitated managers having to ensure that these programmes are delivered with the necessary degree of rigour, whilst also ensuring that they represent good value for money (Feather, 2016).

The feeling of being underprepared is also linked to the shifting nature of further education. The current reduction in public spending has been particularly significant within the further education sector. The overall reduction in spending on education that totalled 13.4% over 3 years (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2012) has already had an impact on further education, with a reduction in the number of lecturers in the sector being noted in the last 3 years (LSIS, 2013). This decline in human resources, combined with the focus on KPIs and the lack of training available for managers, has ensured that the buffering role that Gleeson and Shain (1999) identified is a particular challenge in light of the inevitability that ‘those running curriculum departments will mainly be judged by student outcomes’ (Briggs, 2001:13). Hence, with limited (and shrinking) resources, those occupying the buffering positions are likely to focus on

quantitative targets such as ‘success’. This narrow focus is likely to ensure that, despite the headline rates being impressive, the wider concept of the student experience is neglected (Briggs, 2001). Although the teachers under the manager’s control have the ‘ability to speak fluently the language of performativity’ (Orr, 2012:58), their willingness to take risks and the inculcation of confidence that this provides (Iredale et al., 2013) is lacking within the straitjacket of a risk-averse approach. Despite the claim that the quasi-market created by incorporation would free and invigorate the market (Smith, 2007), this appears not to have been the case.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Research**

This study’s main purpose is to look at the transition lecturers experience when they first take on the role of a manager within the post-compulsory education sector. It will also look at how they are prepared for the transition by the organisation, how they are recruited, what support they receive and how they cope with the transition. In order to obtain an in-depth understanding, a semi-structured interview approach will be taken and a questionnaire will also be used; more details are included in chapters three and four.

The main research aim is ‘to examine the role, the context and the self-identity of middle managers within the post-compulsory education sector and how they transition into the role’. Breaking this down rather more, there are four defined objectives for the research:

- 1) To critically evaluate the challenges associated with the transitions lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to a managerial role.
- 2) To critically evaluate the impact of the training and support given by colleges of post-compulsory education on middle managers.
- 3) To critically evaluate different conceptualisations of ‘professionalism’ within management in a post-compulsory education context.
- 4) To identify good practice for colleges when selecting, training, supporting and evaluating managers.

#### **1.4 Background factors to the study – my experiences**

After leaving university and working in a succession of rather unfulfilling jobs, I was asked to teach Industrial Relations to a group of 18-year-olds at my local college. The college was viewed as the ‘inferior’ college within the town and tended to attract students from the poorer estates. Many of these students had performed poorly at school and the college was seen as a ‘second chance’. Despite the view within the town that the college was not somewhere that people aspired to go to, it prided itself in taking a nurturing, student-centred approach, and a significant number of students progressed to higher education; in many cases, they were the first generation from their family to do so.

This shaped my view of the sector, as did my upbringing. On one side of the family, there is a long history of social campaigning, which encompasses the championing of the rights of the working class, and support for women’s rights and for the rights of the underprivileged. The other side of the family came from a mining community in the North East and, until the generation before my own, the expectation was always that each son would follow their father down the pit. This cycle was broken by education when, despite family opposition, the local school and college encouraged the brighter students to go to university and seek out a life beyond the village.

These two sides of the family neatly encompass the original purpose of further education that dates back to the work of Raikes, More and Birkbeck. In effect, the pursuit of knowledge encouraged a broadening of expectations, the support for groups who were not part of the established elite and a thirst for knowledge to give people the opportunity to transform their lives. In effect, ‘libraries gave us power’ (Wire, 1996:1) and this family philosophy, as well as my early experiences of the sector, have influenced my approach to education ever since.

After my initial job in the sector, I moved to a college in another part of the country and, after working as a lecturer in Business, I was promoted to a role where I held middle management responsibilities. The college had a strong ethos of supporting students and of helping those for whom the compulsory sector had not been a success. This was supported by a Principal who instilled this approach into every part of the college, and so

the transition to my first middle management role felt like a smooth progression and one that did not entail any great change in my central philosophy. After the retirement of this Principal, a succession of new senior managers was appointed and the names of those at the top were changed. The Principal became the Chief Executive and a number of Quality and Compliance Officers were appointed.

This change in names was accompanied by a change in culture to one that could be described as performative in nature. In addition to departmental responsibilities, I held cross-college roles, including being the Head of Teaching and Learning, and I also had a role within the lesson observation team. The change in culture started immediately upon the appointment of the new Principal and represented a significant change to the middle management position. Management meetings were no longer dominated by talk of students and the curriculum; instead, each department was set weekly targets and a meeting every Monday was held to discuss progress. A league table approach was introduced, which meant that departments competed against each other, with those at the top rewarded with positive reinforcement and additional holidays, whilst those at the bottom were asked to write reports about why they were in that position. This created a rather different culture and, although the middle managers were experienced, many struggled to adapt and left. Their replacements, who were generally promoted from within, were expected to be part of the league table from the start. With little training provided, many left the position within a short space of time and were then quickly replaced by another lecturer promoted from within.

Inevitably, that background is likely to influence any research unless measures are put in place to prevent this happening. The discussion about 'insider research' will take place in section 3.6 but it is important to raise this here.

The research objective and associated objectives of the thesis developed from these experiences and the desire to support lecturers who were asked to become middle managers in this culture. The balancing act that I experienced, between ensuring that the student was at the centre of the process and ensuring that the department's position within the league tables was maintained, was one that was shared by many colleagues and,

without training and support, it seemed as though the same mistakes were being made throughout the college (and talking more widely, within the sector). The sharing of good practice and a more structured formal support process was not seen as a way in which new managers could be helped with the transition to their new role and also as a way in which they could begin to understand how their own personal philosophy could be maintained whilst also ensuring that the performative nature of the sector was acknowledged.

### **1.5 Defining middle management in the English Post-Compulsory Education Sector**

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS, 2013) reports that 168,333 contracts were in existence within the 266 further education colleges in England who reported data to their most recent annual survey. Whilst this might seem to be a useful way of assessing the scope of the sector, care must be taken when trying to define both the role of the middle manager and the rather vague and nebulous concept of ‘post-compulsory education’. Firstly, some staff will hold multiple contracts and this means that the true number is likely to be only 85-90% of the reported number (LSIS, 2013). Secondly, whilst 266 colleges represent 78% of all colleges in England (Association of Colleges, AoC, 2013), it excludes the wider notion of the ‘post-compulsory’ sector (discussed later), concentrating, as it does, on general FE colleges, sixth form colleges, land-based colleges and specialist colleges. Finally, the celerity and transitory nature of employment within much of the sector means that accurate figures for numbers of employees and hence middle managers within the sector are difficult to quantify; therefore, any values given will have an inbuilt potential error.

Briggs (2006) describes middle management within education as those who lead service departments as well as those leading curriculum areas. Whilst undoubtedly true, the role of the service manager falls outside the scope of this study as it is likely to be influenced by a rather different set of variables than those examined below. Instead, the focus will be on managers of the curriculum, a group that much of the literature attempts to describe as strategists within the sector in the post-incorporation age

(Leader, 2004; Lumby, 1999). This definition is rather different to the standard definition of the middle manager within compulsory education, which is a somewhat broader definition and encompasses teachers who have any responsibilities in addition to their standard teaching duties. Indeed, in some cases, managers who lead departments (the archetypal middle manager within post-compulsory education) would be viewed as 'senior' in this sector. Hence, it is important not to generalise across sectors when trying to formulate any examples of best practice.

### **1.5.1 The tasks of the middle manager**

Returning to the post-compulsory sector, this view of the purpose of the middle management *métier* is not universal and there is an alternative viewpoint that divides the job into two contrasting roles.

The first role is as the mediator of change, a role identified by Gleeson and Shain (1999), whereby the manager acts as an intermediary between the demands of senior managers and the (often) contrasting goals of the lecturers. This role as an 'ideological buffer between senior managers and lecturers through which market reform is filtered in the FE workplace' (Gleeson and Shain, 1999:462) ensures that their strategic role is limited. Instead this 'piggy in the middle' role necessitates that the holder acts as a pivot that turns the dreams of senior managers into practical realities. Briggs (2006:14) describes the purpose of this function as being to 'transform strategic policy into strategic practice', despite the fact that they generally do not have any input into the initial policy.

The second role is the operational part of the job, which involves dealing with the day-to-day minutiae that exists within the organisation, a scenario that falls a long way short of the strategic goals outlined by Leader (2004) and Lumby (1999). Issues that need to be addressed are often associated with staffing problems, curriculum changes, disciplinary issues, maintenance of KPIs and trying to maintain a healthy work/life balance. These competing demands could be characterised as akin to spinning plates (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). The complexity of the role is exacerbated by the fluid and often ephemeral environment within which education exists. Jameson's (2006) evocative descriptions of



the problems of ‘organisational anorexia’ and ‘the cesspool syndrome’ illustrate just a few of the background issues faced by some managers trying to balance competing demands in organisations that are struggling to cope with the post-incorporation demands. Indeed, this area is one that remains central to any understanding of the role of the manager within post-compulsory education. The ‘dark side’ of management (Jameson, 2006) is something that is often ignored when preparing lecturers for management but it remains vital to the effective completion of the role. This ‘dark side’ includes two linked concepts: firstly, the ethical side of leadership and, secondly, the impact of the role on the managers themselves.

The first point is particularly important given the austerity measures that are in place within the sector. This, linked with the current performative nature of the sector, means that a great deal of pressure is put on managers to ensure that KPIs are met and that success rates are maintained and improved. Dennis and Walker (2016) suggest that this puts a great deal of pressure on managers when students are not succeeding in their courses, as that affects success rates. They further suggest that the temptation for managers is to put pressure on lecturers to provide ever-increasing amounts of support for these students to ensure that they are able to pass their qualification.

### **1.5.2 The ‘dark side’ of management – the personal impact and ethics of middle managers**

Returning to Jameson’s (2006) second point about the ‘dark side’ of management, the impact on the middle managers themselves is something that needs to be addressed. The move to management is a transition that can entail a significant amount of stress and, if not supported, it can impact on the manager’s life, both at work and away from the college. Previous studies (Briggs, 2005a, 2005b, 2006) have found that this has been the case, with managers feeling alienated from their staff who were previously colleagues and under extreme pressure both from lecturers and senior managers. Whilst many managers are able to cope with these stresses, a minority turn to ways of coping that might be described as

‘unhealthy’, with excessive alcohol consumption and reliance on medication being reported (Jameson, 2006).

The complexity of the sector and the ambiguities associated with both the role and the sector mean that the ethical dimension is an important yet fluid part of the role. Dennis and Walker (2016:5) talk about the difficulty of defining ethics within the sector and how this varies from college to college: ‘...there can be no credible conceptual framing of ethics that would allow us to make selective judgements about which leaders in the sector counted as ethical and which did not’. This means that managers are often left to make judgements by themselves; this, in turn, can be viewed as either a liberating approach to the role, or a great burden on new managers. How they respond varies (Dennis and Walker, 2016), hence producing inconsistencies of approach to the role.

Both roles (the mediator of change and the operational approach) are typified by a reactive rather than a proactive approach to the role, and the ambiguities between the goals of the job and the practical realities of the role – and indeed the wider debate about the interchangeable use of the terms ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ (Bush and Coleman, 2000) – means that it is important to clearly define the group that this study will be looking at. Hence, for the purposes of this work, a middle manager in post-compulsory education is defined as anyone who has line management responsibility within a defined curriculum area (or areas). Thus, it would exclude managers who have overarching, cross-college roles (such as Head of Teaching and Learning or Director of Quality) and Service Managers (such as Student Services, Premises or Finance) and it would also exclude those who have curriculum responsibility but have no line management duties (normally this would be those with course coordination roles). The title of this group is likely to vary between organisations but the most common titles will be Curriculum Manager, Head of School or Programme Area Manager; however, for the purposes of this study, they will collectively be referred to as middle managers.

Returning to the analysis of the sector, within the colleges surveyed, there are 10,292 managers that are not defined as ‘senior’ (LSIS, 2013). Whilst this includes Service Managers, it excludes other areas of the sector and hence may be used as an estimation of the scope of both the numbers

within this role and also of the scope of this research as limited by the definition of ‘middle manager within post-compulsory education’.

## **1.6 The post-compulsory education sector**

Attempting to define what is meant by ‘the post-compulsory education sector’ is fraught with difficulties due to the complexities of disentangling the varied (and ever-changing) interests associated with the area. Armitage et al. (2007) describe how the term is often used interchangeably with ‘further education’ to describe education that takes place once a person has left school. However, this definition, where learning is deemed to take place at a general FE college or a sixth form college, neglects both the training element of the sector (Armitage et al., 2007) but also the rather broader ‘widening participation’ remit that can be traced in the sector from roots as diverse as the original Birkbeck lectures and the publication of *Learning works* (Kennedy, 1997).

The funding methodology used by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) attempts to quantify and define the area, and its description of the sector expands the initial definition to include private training organisations, adult education organisations and employers offering apprenticeship routes. This broadening of the sector is to be welcomed as it embraces the diversity of post-compulsory education; however, it cannot be described as definitive as it excludes any area that does not receive public funding through this body, such as military training, education within the NHS and prison education.

The definition taken for this study comes from Jameson and Hillier (2003:2), who describe the sector as ‘Educational provision for post-compulsory education age learners at sub-degree level in a range of post-16, adult and extra-mural education and training institutions’. This description, often referred to as part of the rather loose term ‘lifelong learning’, is useful when describing the sector, although there are areas that it excludes, such as employer-led apprenticeships and the increasing appearance of higher education courses within further education. The ephemeral nature of the sector can perhaps best be summed up by Jameson’s (2013:2) evocative phrase describing the sector as the ‘Yes,

but...and' sector. However, to ensure consistency throughout, the original Jameson and Hillier (2003) definition will be the guiding principle as to what constitutes post-compulsory education.

Due to differing reporting procedures, differing professional standards and differing governance of the sector, this study will focus on the sector within England. Both the Scottish and the Welsh systems are linked to the English approach; however, they are both slightly different and hence, to ensure increased validity of findings, the research and recommendations will just cover the English post-compulsory education system. That is not to say that good practice can only be found in England, and where identified in literature in other countries, it will be referred to; however, the primary research completed will only cover the sector within England.

### **1.7 Performative culture**

Many of the roles listed could be classified as existing due to the culture of performativity that typifies much of the post-compulsory sector (Ball, 2003). This culture, which could be traced back to Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976 (Wilkins, 2010), focused on the emerging marketisation of the education sector. This codification of much of the sector has meant that the role, and indeed the targets, of the middle manager are often defined by KPIs that are externally set and measured. Although this has the advantage of superficially quantifying and comparing providers, it also means that a managerial approach tends to be adopted that is at odds with the educational paradigm favoured by many lecturers. 'Wendy', a lecturer interviewed by Gleeson and Shain (1999), exemplified that diversification of the two roles:

Quality is defined in ways by management which are completely different from how teaching staff would define quality and there is an awful lot of resentment about this. As teachers who are doing the teaching, dealing with the students every day, we know what constitutes quality.

(Gleeson and Shain, 1999:456)

The interviewee goes on to describe a system where quality and success is defined in purely statistical terms and in terms of achievement of qualifications.

Smith (2007) expands the idea of performativity by stressing the primacy of the funding mechanism in addition to the established, quantitative measures of success. He describes a system where managers are encouraged to chase funding as well as trying to ensure that targets are met and benchmarks are exceeded. This system, although by now well established, has the potential to both create divisions between teaching and managerial staff, as described by Gleeson and Shain (1999), and create an environment that allows the darker side of leadership, as defined by Jameson (2006), to flourish. The focus on what is measurable, and the knowledge of the consequences when these targets are not met, appears to have been a factor in the increase in bullying claims, increased stress and the downplaying of the educational needs of the students in the sector (Jameson, 2006). This darker side has manifested itself in an increase in stress levels, an increase in strike days lost as employees protest and also an increase in claims of mistreatment by lecturers within the sector (Smithers and Robinson, 2000).

The most visible current example of where performativity impacts on the role of the middle manager is in the increased use of graded lesson observations as a measure of both the competency of the lecturer and, in some cases, the pay of the lecturer (O'Leary, 2014). The use of these measures has ensured that managers have to enforce a consistency of approach to teaching within their curriculum area that might conflict with established notions of professionalism and even personalisation of learning (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2014). As with many of the performativity-based approaches, the stated purpose of the lesson observation schemes brought in was as a method of improving the quality of provision and also to support lecturers in areas of weakness. In effect, however, they ended up being used as another measurement of the effectiveness of a curriculum area and, by reflection, the manager responsible for the area (Edgington, 2013).

This culture of performativity has been challenged recently and it is important to ensure that there is a counterpoint to this argument. Merely

talking about managers as implementers of a performativity-inspired culture is an overly simplistic way of describing both the sector and the role. Gleeson and Shain (1999) talk about the ‘strategic compliance’ approach to management but the reality is likely to be more nuanced than this. Daley et al (2015) talk about the interaction between managers and lecturers and how this can influence organisational goals. They talk about how power can lie within the teacher and how ‘...we put up two banners on the walls: “Teachers are dangerous people” and paraphrasing Freire: “There is no such thing as a neutral education, education acts as either a process of domestication or liberation”’ (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015:14). These banners were designed to get teachers to reflect, yet they were repeatedly taken down by persons unknown and their existence was seen as too overt an indication of how the balance between lecturers and other representatives in the college is not quite as straightforward as it is sometimes portrayed.

Care should also be taken in describing the sector in narrow, performative terms. Since its inception and the introduction of Mechanics Institutes in 1821 to help educate workers in the machinery being used for production, it has served a purpose that runs beyond the mere passing of exams. It is seen as a way of giving people the opportunity of education, which was not present beforehand. Kennedy talked about this being ‘widening participation’ (Kennedy, 1997) but it is likely to run deeper than this. The original Mechanics Institutes were linked to the movement to educate the working classes and to allow them to vote, a process driven by the adult education sector and pioneers such as Raikes, More and others. This ‘second chance’ approach, allied to the campaigning approach that the sector takes, is deeply engrained. Petrie (2015) talks about how successive governments have discussed the importance of the sector to the country and how this culture is still embedded in further education, meaning that any description which fails to acknowledge it is likely to be incomplete.

Returning to the purpose of this section, it is important to note that having been part of the sector, I am likely to have been aware of the primacy of many of these ideals. I will also have my own views on the sector, which will be influenced by the colleges I worked in and my experiences within the role. A full explanation of the measures taken to ensure that this bias

does not impact on the overall results is included in the methodology section.

## **1.8 Structure of the research**

The dissertation is structured in the following way. After the initial exploration of the key terms and a statement of the research questions, Chapter 2 introduces the philosophical framework that will be used as the lens in which to analyse middle management as well as taking a detailed and critical look at the literature that surrounds this subject, whilst the following chapter explores the philosophical arguments that surround the methodological approach used. Chapter 4 explains and critically analyses the research methods used.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 contain the analysis and the findings from the research. Chapter 5 looks at the shared understanding of what is meant by management whilst the following chapter looks at individual managers and sees how their individual perceptions shape their experiences and also their identity. This chapter looks at the human side of management and looks to understand the people who manage. Chapter 7 brings the two elements together and looks at the various dimensions in which managers work. In addition, it explores the drivers of individual managers and identifies what can help someone become a successful middle manager in the sector.

Finally, Chapter 8 contains conclusions, recommendations and a review of both the research questions and the contribution to knowledge.

## **1.9 Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of both the background to the research and the sector. It has also sought to define the key terms; although these may be contested by some literature, they reflect much of the current literature. The problems of quantifying the sector were noted and also the differing definitions of middle managers. Using the work of Gleeson and Shain (1999) and Briggs (2006) as a base, it was decided that the study will be limited to looking at the role of the academic middle manager

rather than trying to encompass middle managers from outside specific academic departments or those who have a cross-college role. In addition to this, the boundaries of the post-compulsory sector were framed using the definition provided by Jameson and Hillier (2003). Finally, the impact of performativity on the sector was explored and balanced by other cultures inherent within the sector.





## **Chapter 2: Reviewing the Literature and the Theoretical Perspectives Framing the Study**

### **2.1 Introduction to the chapter**

This chapter reviews the current literature regarding the transition between the role of lecturer and the role of manager in further education and then identifies the lens through which the subject will be examined through. A thematic approach will be adopted to ensure that the aim of the research – to examine the role, the context and the self-identity of middle managers within post-compulsory education and how they transition into the role - can be addressed, as well as the research objectives, which are as follows:

- 1) To critically evaluate the challenges associated with the transitions lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to a managerial role.
- 2) To critically evaluate the impact of the training and support given by colleges of post-compulsory education on middle managers.
- 3) To critically evaluate different conceptualisations of ‘professionalism’ within management in a post-compulsory education context.
- 4) To identify good practice for colleges when selecting, training, supporting and evaluating managers.

A thematic approach has been used to help explore key areas, although it is important to ensure that the interconnectivity between the areas is identified (Newby, 2010). To ensure that this is the case, a systematic literature review approach (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008) will be used, with the broad themes identified being the following:

- 1) The role of the middle manager within the post-compulsory sector. This will also focus on the complexities of defining ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ in the context of the sector.
- 2) Performativity and the current post-compulsory education landscape.

- 3) The evolving concepts of ‘professionalism’ and ‘dual professionalism’ within the post-compulsory education sector. The various definitions will be examined so that they can be applied where necessary.
- 4) Transitions within education. A key concept here is self-identity for both lecturers and managers. The impact of the transition on self-identity will be examined, as well as differing views on how organisations can plan for the transition and its subsequent impact.

These themes will provide important theoretical context to the fieldwork and the order ensures that the reader is guided through the literature in a systematic, logical and interesting manner (Newby, 2010).

This chapter is structured in the following way. The next section (3.2) looks at the landscape in which managers operate. This covers the post-incorporation period as well as the performative approach that exists in much of the sector. This is followed (in section 3.3) by a discussion about what is meant by ‘professionalism’ within the sector and how this is perceived in different ways by the many stakeholders. These two parts set the scene for the final two parts, which focus on the people within the post-compulsory education landscape. Firstly, there is a discussion of the literature regarding management and leadership (section 3.4) and this is followed by a look at the self-identity of those who work within the landscape described, hence completing the journey from the macro landscape to the micro analysis of the individual.

## **2.2 Performativity and the current post-compulsory education landscape**

### **2.2.1 The shift to a performative culture**

The concept of performativity, described by Ball (2003: ii) as a method of control that requires ‘individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations’, has become the dominant ideology in the governance of the sector. This approach, which stresses KPIs above all other factors, has fundamentally altered the relationship

not only between middle managers and lecturers but also between workers within the sector and indeed the job itself. Avis (2005:212) argues that ‘performativity, through its chain of targets and accountability, operates within a “blame culture” where accountability becomes a means by which the institution can call to account its members’.

The change in relationship and the shift to a performative culture has been clearly articulated by Avis, Kendal and Parsons (2003), who write that, instead of being empowered professionals, lecturers were viewed as trusted. From this perspective, the shift to a view of success as something that can be measured, has seen a rise of ‘compliance’ management, whereby the primary role of the middle manager is to check and measure (O’Leary, 2014) rather than support and develop. In effect, compliance management stresses that the job is either ‘done’ or ‘not done’, depending on whether targets have been reached. When a target has not been reached, then it is often the case that ‘blame’ is then apportioned.

In a sense, the term ‘trusted servants’ (Avis, Kendal and Parsons, 2003:239) implies that the focus for teaching staff is to carry out the bidding of their ‘masters’ in ways which are deemed appropriate to the task and the situation. This is done through the formulation and distribution of clearly defined outcomes and targets that focus activity in the desired areas. In theory, this is a simple enough process, yet what appears to be problematic in this description is the use of the word ‘trusted’, something which appears to be out of alignment with the multitude of controls that are in place, such as graded lesson observations, performance management, appraisals and KPIs (O’Leary, 2013). The apparatus of control, it seems, is rather more highly developed than it might be if lecturers were truly ‘trusted’. Indeed, for many writers, a more accurate description of how lecturers are viewed might be as ‘recalcitrant children’ (Leathwood, 2000: 172). Leathwood (2000) suggests that this might lead to a relationship between middle manager and lecturer that could best be described as ‘schizophrenic management’, whereby, although the initial description refers to lecturers being trusted professionals, the reality is that they are perceived as needing to be controlled and closely monitored.

### **2.2.2 The changing nature of the relationship between lecturer and manager**

The rise of 'compliance' and 'blame' in a performative culture has fundamentally altered the relationship between the manager and the lecturer (Silverman, 2008). Whereas, historically, the educational paradigm which put the student at the centre of any process retained primacy, now it could be argued that workers are expected to work towards goals that recall an approach described by Beynon (1975) of workers on a production line. In this research, workers were viewed as having one key function, that of tools to be used as a means to an end. This caused resentment amongst workers who had previously been viewed as professionals (Beynon, 1975). Workers interviewed in the research talked of their resentment of being controlled and the feelings of 'them and us' that this provoked when 'they' decided on targets and how hard the 'workers' worked. Some participants saw the relationship in terms that might seem more appropriate to a power struggle: 'We've just got to destroy (them).....sort them out' (Beynon, 1975:238). Whilst this might be a more extreme example, other research (Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Avis, Kendal and Parsons, 2003) clearly identifies a change in the relationship between middle managers and lecturers to a compliance- and indeed a blame-based approach. Some writers have sought to find a bridge between the two groups and show how they do support each other. Lebor (2016) talks about how managers try to support lecturers with behaviour management issues, and the group surveyed were clearly keen to stress the collaborative nature of the relationship.

The introduction of a performativity-based culture could also be said to lead to the deskilling described by Beynon (1975), whereby workers were encouraged not to think about the bigger picture; instead, they merely focused on achieving their own small target whilst others worried about how this fitted into the organisational objectives. In the sector being discussed, this was ensuring a certain percentage of students passed, rather than ensuring a certain percentage of components were within tolerance, but the general principles of a target-based workplace remained in place. Avis, Kendal and Parsons (2003) have noted that this has led to

the removal of professional autonomy and the increase in accountability which has fundamentally altered the sector.

### **2.2.3 The incorporation of colleges**

Research suggests that the performativity-based approach may be traced back to the incorporation of colleges that occurred after the passing of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (Simmons and Thompson, 2008; Avis, 2005). The dominance of the economic imperative, as described by Hyland and Merrill (2003), was at the heart of incorporation, and changed the nature of post-compulsory education. The move has been defined as the belief in ‘...the efficacy of the free market’ (Simmons, 2008:429) and is characterised by neo-liberalist principles of free enterprise, free market and the measurement of success in quantitative terms (Simmons, 2008). This use of KPIs has been a signpost to the rise of a compliance culture (Silverman, 2008) that has altered the relationship between teachers and managers to one of control and indeed blame (Avis et al, 2003) rather than support, as detailed above.

In part, due to this change, the measurement of a successful college is now prescribed in exact terms rather than defined in the rather more general phrases that were used before, such as ‘strong support’ or ‘community focused’. The idea of ‘professional judgement’ was replaced by a culture that stressed the necessity to meet the set targets (Tripp, 2012), hence the concept of ‘compliance’ became embedded within the sector (Avis, 2005). This has been typified by the changing role of Ofsted, which has attempted to define what makes a successful college. This has had a significant impact on the post-compulsory education phase, and the importance of the inspection has contributed to the changing relationships within the sector. Ball (2003) talked about the ‘terrors of performativity’ within colleges, and the shifting nature of the relationships within post-compulsory education reflects this, with the role of the traditional head of department, or indeed any other middle manager, evolving into one that encompasses financial, managerial and performance aspects as well as the established educational imperative.

Some writers have argued that the shifting approach can be traced back to Callaghan's Ruskin speech in 1976 (Wilkins, 2010; Batteson, 1997), which focused on the emerging marketisation of the education sector (a process reinforced by the neo-liberal culture inherent in the process of incorporation and indeed by the wider shift in society that was grouped under the collective name of Thatcherism) and the introduction of both a rewards and a sanctions culture (Wilkins, 2010). However, this approach, whilst conceived almost 50 years ago, has been strengthened in the last 20 years by a funding mechanism that stresses the importance of achievement at the end of a course of study and consolidated into the concept of compliance within education (Silverman, 2008). In effect, the idea of professionalism and indeed 'success' within the sector has been reworked (Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler, 2005). Prior to incorporation, it was an internally driven concept that was inculcated through custom and practice and often differed from college to college. Now, it is measured externally (Ball, 2003) by organisations such as Ofsted, which has the power to impose sanctions if nationally decided ideals and priorities are not met.

#### **2.2.4 Management in a performative culture**

The 'terrors of performativity' (Ball, 2003) creates a climate whereby managers are encouraged to aim for quantitative and clearly defined goals. Writers such as Deem (2011) and Avis (2005) argue that this approach spawns a management function which is oversimplified, with a focus on the end result rather than the process. To use Jameson's phrase, the leadership function should 'comprise processes and actions (that) influence other people' (Jameson, 2006:21). This broader function might well be used by managers; however, with the measurement of success being by KPIs, it may lessen in its importance. Instead, the middle manager's role, in a performativity-based culture, becomes to implement processes, ensure compliance to these processes and monitor their effectiveness rather than necessarily influencing people in the broader sense of this phrase (Briggs, 2006).

According to Ball (2003), a further impact is the introduction of a homogeneous culture in place of the more disparate approaches normally

associated with further education colleges. The introduction of a strict control-based leadership style (Johnson and Scholes, 2002) and the breaking down of the various functional silos (Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn, 2004), are noticeable outcomes of the performative regime. This is most noticeable in the differing microcultures that are often found when comparing departments within the same organisation (Johnson and Scholes, 2002).

In theory, this homogeneous culture means that all managers have a common goal to aim for and ensures that the 'greater good' of the organisation remains paramount. Whilst this is designed to ensure greater conformity, it does have significant consequences for the role of the middle manager – turning them from innovators to implementers (Johnson and Scholes, 2002). In reality, it is also very hard to implement in a disparate culture such as that found in English further education.

#### **2.2.5 Codification, funding and the rise of quality mechanisms**

The movement towards increased codification of much of the sector has meant that the role, and indeed the targets, of the middle manager might well be defined by KPIs that are externally set and externally measured. Coffield et al. (2014) talk of this codification as being an attempt at ensuring consistency in aspects of education that had been diverse before. These mechanisms, which include the establishment of league tables and the measurement of teaching observations, have led to a focus on quantitative targets within the sector. Although this has the advantage of superficially comparing providers, it also means that there might be a conflict between achieving these targets and supporting lecturers.

Jameson (2006) has argued that when power, and in particular power linked to the achievement of measurable goals, is given, then, in some instances, this power is used inappropriately. The concept of the darker side of leadership will be explored in more detail later; however, the twin concepts of compliance and blame might well combine to create a culture which could be termed 'oppressive', given the tightly defined success criteria.



### **2.2.6 Graded lesson observations**

The most visible current example of where performativity impacts on the role of the middle manager is in the increased use of graded lesson observations as a measure of both the competency of the lecturer and, in some cases, the pay of the lecturer (O’Leary, 2013). The use of these measures has ensured that managers tend to encourage a consistency of approach to teaching within their curriculum area that might conflict with established notions of professionalism (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2014; Edgington, 2013; O’Leary, 2014; Matthews and Noyes, 2016). As with many of the performativity-based approaches, the lesson observation schemes brought in were introduced as a method of improving the quality of provision and also to support lecturers in areas of weakness. However, in some cases, they narrow the range of activities that a lecturer is encouraged to do within a lesson and they end up being used as another measurement of the effectiveness of a curriculum area and, by reflection, the manager responsible for the area (Edgington, 2013).

The literature suggests that the prevalence of performativity within the sector has ensured that the ‘buffering’ role that Gleeson and Shain (1999) identified is a particular challenge in light of the inevitability that ‘those running curriculum departments will mainly be judged by student outcomes’ (Briggs, 2001: 13). Hence, with limited (and shrinking) resources, those occupying the buffering positions are likely to focus on quantitative targets such as ‘success’ rates rather than a wider concept of ‘lifelong learning’ (Kennedy, 1997) that, it could be argued, was once the *raison d’être* of the sector. This narrow focus is likely to ensure that, despite the headline rates being impressive, the wider concept of the student experience is neglected (Kennedy, 1997). Although the teachers under the manager’s control have the ‘ability to speak fluently the language of performativity’ (Orr, 2012:58), their willingness to take risks and the inculcation of confidence that this provides (Iredale et al., 2013) is lacking within the straitjacket of a risk-averse approach. Despite the claim that the quasi-market created by incorporation would free and invigorate the market (Smith, 2007), there is compelling evidence to suggest that this has not been the case.

This concept of a risk-averse approach has been detailed by many writers (O’Leary, 2013; Edgington, 2013; Iredale et al., 2013) and perhaps may be seen best when looking at the concept of graded lesson observations. As mentioned, these form a key part of the measurement of ‘success’ and indeed competency. As with many KPIs within a performative culture, what makes a successful lesson has been tightly defined and communicated to lecturers. According to O’Leary (2013), this means that, when being observed, many lecturers aim to conform to an established method rather than trying something different; in effect, they do not ‘take risks’. In some cases, this risk-averse approach goes further, with many lecturers talking about their desire to achieve a Grade 2 (good) rather than a Grade 1 (outstanding), due to the extra responsibilities that are placed on them if deemed to be ‘outstanding’ (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2014). These extra responsibilities (that normally consist of acting as mentors, training others or merely being held up as a role model) were viewed as an onerous burden and, again, added to the tendency to play safe and not risk either failing to match the defined expectations or, alternatively, be given extra work.

### **2.2.7 Incorporation – an alternative narrative and the impact of austerity**

Although many writers talk about the impact of incorporation and the growth of a performativity-based culture in a negative way, the reality is rather more nuanced than this. Incorporation can be seen as part of a wider, societal shift away from a state-controlled system towards one that was designed to be responsive to individual needs. Simmons (2008) suggests that it is easy to look back at the pre-incorporation period through rose-tinted glasses. However, this is misleading as there were often significant problems within the sector that managers were reluctant to address. Pre-incorporation, the primacy of the ‘Silver Book’ contract ensured that lecturers were protected from the market forces that operated elsewhere. This meant that hours were limited to 21 a week, holidays were significantly more generous than they are currently and there was a clear demarcation of duties. In short, there were many inefficiencies in the sector and colleges were highly variable in quality

(Simmons, 2008). This represents a rather different pattern to the structures put in place post-incorporation to ensure consistency.

Another key driver that has influenced research into the sector in the last 5 years has been the austerity measures put in place to cut public funding. This has disproportionately affected colleges, with cuts of 17.5% in 2015 to core funding for full-time students and the removal of funding of tutorials for students (AoC, 2013). In addition to this, previous cuts to the sector that amounted to 32% in real terms during the life of the previous Parliament (Buttle, 2010) have necessitated a change in the approach of colleges to the management of the organisation. Stoten (2011), quoted in Daley et al (2015), talks about the movement towards an entrepreneurial approach when incorporation first occurred and this has been evident in research completed post-2010, in particular with colleges embracing the drive to apprenticeships (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015). The positive tone of this approach has been tempered by other writers with a warning that the economic imperative can influence this approach in ways which do not always put the student at the heart of the process (Stoten, 2011).

Stoten's research suggests that managerial decision-making often reflects the 'habitus' of the manager. In an echo of Page (2011), this can influence the goals of the manager. Thus, the entrepreneurial approach identified by Daley, Orr and Petrie (2015) is not a consistent one across the sector. Boocock (2015) addressed this theme when he invoked the rhetoric of Legrand (1997). This suggests that there are two separate types of manager: knaves, who focus on self-interest and generally ignore the wider 'good' of the sector, and knights, who have more altruistic motives. Incorporation was predicated on the idea that knavish behaviour was a good way of improving efficiency and standards within the sector (Boocock, 2015) and although there is evidence to suggest that this improvement has happened, in particular the increase in success rates for students within the sector to 85.9% of students passing (Department for Education, 2017), other sources of evidence suggest that this is not always a correct assumption. An example of this has been the declining participation rates in the sector, with 18.4% fewer students attending classes in 2016 than 6 years previously (Department for Education, 2017), indicating a sector in some decline despite the focus on outcomes.

### **2.2.8 Summarising performativity in the sector**

The evidence from the literature has suggested that the incorporation of colleges under the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) has led to a profound shift in culture within the sector. A movement to an approach that is based on KPIs and conformity has meant that the role of the manager has changed, and in particular their relationship with lecturers has altered from one of support to one of control. This has meant that a more business-focused approach has been adopted and, whilst in some cases this was needed (Simmons, 2008), it has meant that the educational imperative has been supplanted by a managerial approach in some cases.

## **2.3 The concept of ‘professionalism’ within the post-compulsory education sector**

### **2.3.1 Defining ‘professionalism’**

‘Few professionals talk as much about being professional as those whose professional stature is in doubt’ (Katz, 1969:71). In many ways, this quote sums up the ongoing discussion in the literature on the issue of professionalism within the sector, which suggests that any definition is somewhat nebulous. Similarly, the way in which professionalism is measured changes on a regular basis and this section will explore some of the main themes within the context of the sector defined in the previous part. An important consideration at this point is the interaction between theory and practice. Anyon et al. (2008) discuss this relationship and argue that many studies fail to map the relationship between the two. By using both theory and empirical research, greater understanding can be gained. This is particularly true when looking at professionalism, where there is a great deal of discussion regarding the theoretical concept but also the practical implications of what professionalism means to the workforce.

Defining professionalism is a theme taken up in the work of Furlong et al. (2000), who identify three key aspects that combine to create the concept of ‘professionalism’. These are knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. It is in the context of these themes that the literature in this area will be examined. Taking these three themes in turn, Furlong et al. (2000) refer to

a specialised body of knowledge as being crucial to describing someone as professional. In most cases, this has been studied both theoretically and practically, echoing the work on professionalism by Sachs (2001), who explored the possibility of teaching being viewed as a craft; in all cases, it is specific to the professional body explored. The second theme, that of autonomy, is key to the definition. Professionals are viewed as working in 'complex and difficult situations' (Furlong et al., 2000:5) and are hence trusted to make their own decisions without undue interference from anyone else. Linked to this is the theme of responsibility; in short, you are trusted to make the right decision. This definition has been challenged (Lawlor, 1990). However, it provides a useful definition of professionalism that can be used to examine the various aspects discussed within the literature.

The changes that occurred post-incorporation and the subsequent changing nature of the sector have had a significant impact on the perception of professionalism by middle managers. As a result of the performative culture in the sector, the view of success has moved to a quantitative approach, as outlined by Ball (2003), and away from a wider concept of 'professional judgement' (Tripp, 2012).

The complexity of the concept of professionalism and thus how to measure whether something is 'professional' is best summed up by a Lewis Carroll quote used by Spenceley (2006):

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

(Carroll, 1897:237)

Furlong et al. (2010) describe professionalism as an autonomous and intrinsic state that cannot be merely bestowed. This is a definition that contradicts attempts by successive governments to impose professionalism through regulation. Evans (2011) differentiates between 'enacted' and

‘demanded’ professionalism, with the latter stressing only behaviours rather than attitudes. Her argument is that merely ensuring that lecturers and managers followed a set of standards did not constitute true professionalism; in addition, the danger was that intrinsic professionalism would be damaged if newcomers believed that professionalism could be acquired through regulation rather than approach and attitude. This theme was also examined in the Lingfield report (Lingfield, 2012), which concluded that merely telling someone that they were professional did not mean that they were truly professional.

Throughout the literature, the concept of professional identity remains a key one. James (2017) poses the question as to how this interacts with the structural aspects of the sector, a theme also developed by Bathmaker and Avis (2004), who discuss the struggles that new entrants to the profession have in developing their identity in a sector that is constantly evolving. This is especially true today, when area reviews, austerity and an increased focus on targets mean that the established concept of professionalism – which forms an alternative to the more bureaucratic or managerialist approach seen in colleges (Parsons, 1951) – is not always viewed in a positive light by all participants. Indeed, Susskind and Susskind (2015) discuss the possibility of professionals being replaced by systems, which, as with the issues discussed when looking at performativity, suggests that the role of many within the sector is that of an implementer (Johnson and Scholes, 2002).

The complexities of the sector and how professional identities were interlinked were explored in the ‘learning cultures’ approach developed in the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education (TLCFE) project (2001-2005). This key piece of research, undertaken by authors such as Biesta, James, Hodkinson, Gleeson and Postlethwaite, took a comprehensive look at the sector and investigated how those within it responded to their environment. One of the key conclusions of the project was that the way in which the sector operated, in particular the funding mechanisms and the quality assurance systems, failed to impact in a positive manner on the quality of learning. In part, this was down to the way in which qualifications were now taught and the behaviourist manner in which they were assessed (James, 2017). This concern is mirrored in the

compulsory education sector, where the teacher's primary objective has been redefined as ensuring students pass their qualifications (Day and Smethem, 2009) rather than a broader purpose that has traditionally been an objective of the educational professional.

Despite these challenges, the TLCFE project found that professional identities were strongly held and remarkably resilient (James, 2017). This is reassuring as, despite a great deal of encouragement from governments about the importance of improving the learning culture, the reality is that little attention has been paid to a structured programme, based on a theoretical bedrock, of improvements (a point made by Coffield, 2000, prior to the establishment of the current mechanisms for measurement). The concept of a learning culture is an important one in the sector, with the TLCFE project defining it as the social practices (both formal and informal) through which people learn (James and Biesta, 2007).

Given the interaction with professionals within the sector that this implies, it is clear that great importance should be attached to professionalism. Furlong et al.'s (2000) original definition remains the starting point within the sector; however, it is important to note that attempts to define professionalism, such as those included in the requirements for the QTLS qualification, have led to alternative definitions of professionalism, such as a managerial version discussed by Day and Sachs (2004), which differs from the democratic version (Sachs, 2001) in that it is linked to systems and employers.

### **2.3.2 Dual professionalism and dual identity**

Dual professionalism is an oft-discussed concept within the sector and one that has a significant impact on workers. Orr (2008) defines this as the idea that workers have come into the sector with established notions of professionalism from their previous jobs and this can be a barrier to their self-identity as professionals within education (Orr, 2008). Indeed, Robson (1998) describes situations whereby people prioritise their previous view of professionalism and still identify themselves with their previous job. This is often illustrated in the language used, so a lecturer

might describe themselves as a hairdresser who teaches rather than a hairdressing teacher.

Whilst it might be said that this is merely an argument of semantics, the reality is rather different. Robson, Bailey and Larkin (2004) affirm that it is the lecturer's previous professionalism that gives them credibility in the classroom, yet the demands of (in particular) managerial professionalism (Day and Sachs, 2004) might well clash with this form of professionalism. The strong sense of professional identity found in the TLCFE project (James, 2017) also means that viewing professionalism as a homogeneous concept across one college in the sector, let alone the sector as a whole, is a problematic one and the reality is that professionalism is not something that means the same to everyone. Orr (2008) argues that this very sense of heterogeneity of understanding might well have been one of the reasons for the introduction of standards for the sector and also the complexity of the standards. Despite a great deal of refining, the standards for FE remain significantly longer and more wide-ranging than the equivalent ones for schoolteachers (ETF, 2014). The impact, however, as demonstrated by Lingfield (2012), has not been significant and the dual professional approach is still clearly visible within the sector amongst lecturers and managers, a fact recognised during the setting up of the new Chartered College of Teaching (Chartered College, 2017).

Despite attempts at harmonising definitions of professionalism, it could be argued that dual professionalism can have a positive impact on the sector and on the learning experiences of students. The experiences of lecturers who have worked in a particular sector and understand the levels of professionalism needed can be invaluable to the learning of students. In addition, Higham and Farnsworth (2012) describe how the knowledge of professionals coming into the sector can ensure that courses can prepare students for industry and ensure that they are viewed as truly vocational.

To add to the complexity, the concept of 'dual identity' is also a key feature of the sector (Orr and Simmons, 2010), whereby new members of staff have the dual role of both lecturer and also trainee, with differing expectations attached to each of these functions (this will be discussed later). This means that, although the knowledge part is still intact, the autonomy of the professional and the responsibilities of the professional in



light of these demands are becoming increasingly blurred. In effect, the responsibility of the professional (whether they are a lecturer or a manager) is seen as ensuring that targets are met rather than developments created as a result of professional judgement.

### **2.3.3 Shifting approaches to professionalism**

Whilst attempts to definitively define professionalism have proved less than successful, due to the disparate nature of the sector (Whitty, 2000), the literature suggests that focusing on any narrow definition which only includes what happens within the classroom is misleading and fails to capture the diversity of the term (Dennis, 2015). Instead, professionalism should be described in far broader terms and encompass a wide range of learning spaces, to include social media such as Twitter and Facebook. These modern phenomena are often ignored in discussions around professionalism, yet are something which can have a profound effect on the professional image of employees whose lives outside of the workplace are also under public scrutiny (Dennis, 2015). Gleeson and James (2007) describe how the concept has been reworked from within and how professionalism can be viewed in two ways: firstly, as a series of rules imposed from without (Colley and James, 2005, describe this as something akin to a job description) and, secondly, as something that is shaped from within (Gleeson and James, 2007). This is an argument that was taken up by Lingfield (2012) when he argues that imposing a series of rules did not automatically lead to professionalism; instead; it is necessary for change to come from within.

According to the most recent research, the majority of lecturers and middle managers in the sector have previously been employed in a different sector (ETF, 2016) and, in some cases, they have come into the sector without necessarily planning to do so, a theme taken up by Gleeson and James (2007), who talk about slipping into the role due to unforeseen events. This means that they bring prior knowledge of professionalism to their new job. This creates the dual professionalism discussed in 3.3.2 but also influences how they react to any new organisation when appointed. The links to strategic compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999) are clear: if professionalism comes from within, then, as Gleeson and James (2007)

found, professionals tend to find a way of conforming, whilst also providing learners with what they believe is needed.

Much of the literature argues that, in many instances, 'how to be a professional' is learnt whilst actually doing the job. In effect, it is inculcated through custom and practice (Spenceley, 2006). However, this has not stopped attempts to impose structures on the sector which are designed to reinforce this concept. Avis, Kendal and Parsons (2003) talk about the movement away from subject-specific professionalism towards wider, more nebulous notions of 'teams' and 'facilitation', and it is interesting to note that Briggs (2003) and Busher and Harris (1999) both see one of a manager's key roles as that of the supervision of staff, a role that appears to contradict the traditional approach to the role, which stresses the judgement of the individual and indeed autonomy and responsibility (Furlong et al., 2000). This supervising (and, in many cases, guiding) role (Busher and Harris, 1999) has expanded since incorporation, with Randle and Brady (1997) identifying this as a battle between the autonomous precepts of professionalism and a more structured approach to the role. Professionalism tends to imply that people are able to use their own judgement. However, overarching this is the introduction of the quasi-market that is driven by identifying funding opportunities and 'chasing the money' (Ball, 2003).

The introduction of a requirement for a teacher training qualification in the sector prompted a re-evaluation of the concept of professionalism within post-compulsory education. The first set of standards – developed by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) – attempted to define and standardise the role of a lecturer within the post-compulsory education sector. In effect, it was an attempt to introduce professionalism by qualification rather than via the three themes discussed earlier (Robson, 2006). At the heart of the standards was a desire to define and embed professionalism, with the preamble to the standards making explicit mention of this focus:

[T]here is an underpinning competence of meeting professional requirements which supports and informs all other processes. This has been expressed as a set of values and principles, separate from

the other statements of competence but implicit in all the standards.

(FENTO, 1999: 7)

Whilst this might seem like a sound principle for developing high-quality members of staff, the problem of defining what is meant by professionalism can be seen when looking at standard h, which helps underpin the values of the standards (FENTO, 1999). Whilst other standards describe specific, measurable skills such as those needed to craft objectives for a lesson, show awareness of differing abilities within the class or produce a variety of resources, standard h asks new trainees to do the following:

Meet professional requirements:

This competence underpins all other competences.

It involves being able to:

- work within a professional value base
- conform to agreed codes of professional practice

(FENTO, 1999:9)

The inherent difficulty of defining professionalism (Spenceley, 2006; Robson, 1998) ensures that there is little guidance for assessors to judge whether this part of the standards has been met or not.

The standards that followed the FENTO criteria, created by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) and regulated by Standards Verification UK (SVUK), made a further attempt at defining professionalism and there is an echo of the Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations (2007) within these standards. This Act introduced the idea that a qualification should be mandatory for teachers within the sector. The regulations included an objective stating that a key aim was to foster the development of a sustainable culture of professionalism that enables staff to improve and update their skills continuously (FENTO, 1999). However, again, no attempt was made at actually defining what was meant by professionalism and, again, this might be seen to be an attempt to introduce professionalism via a qualification rather than having a wider focus (Robson, 2006). This point was taken up by Lingfield (2012), who

argues that simply enforcing a qualification did little to enhance professionalism; instead, you needed to focus on all aspects of the role. At this point, it is interesting to look again at the Transforming Learning Cultures (TLC) project. Despite a qualification not being mandatory when the project started, it found that lecturers did see themselves as professional (James and Biesta, 2007) and that they understood both their responsibilities and obligations as such (Gleeson and James, 2007), hence suggesting that the qualification was not the driving force.

The abolition of the requirement for a teacher training qualification within the sector provides further evidence of the difficulty in defining the idea of professionalism. Tummons (2014) suggests that the introduction of defined teacher training standards has had minimal impact on the curriculum, whilst Lord Lingfield's report (Lingfield, 2012) listed many reasons for the revocation of the need for qualifications, including the fact that there has been a 'change in the nature of the debate from "professionalization" of FE to supporting and enhancing the professionalism which we consider already exists' (Lingfield, 2012: 6). Whilst, on the surface, this might seem to suggest that the previous qualifications have succeeded in their goals, it is important to be mindful of the concerns of Randle and Brady (1997), about how professionalism has failed to be properly defined in the sector, and also Spenceley (2006), alluding to Ball (2003), when she talks about the continuing 'struggle for the teacher's soul and the definition of professionalism within FE' (Spenceley, 2006:300).

#### **2.3.4 Teacher competencies versus teaching competencies**

The struggle for the 'soul' can best be defined with reference to the European Commission's (2013) research into teacher competencies and teaching competencies, which aimed to identify how professionalism was embedded in the sector and how this has changed. As mentioned earlier, the research suggested that teaching competencies – those things associated with the craft of teaching based on job-related skills – were seen as dominant in the sector. Competencies were inculcated through processes such as initial teacher education, 'in-house' CPD and also quality assurance processes (European Commission, 2013). This approach

necessitates managers to be controllers and enforcers. One lecturer interviewed for a recent piece of research put it succinctly:

I feel they are telling you how they want you to teach and I want to develop my own way...I feel like there is a very narrow view of what teaching is.

(Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2014)

In contrast, teacher competencies suggest a more systemic view of teacher professionalism, incorporating the organisation, the community and professional networks (European Commission, 2013). This sees the lecturer as being more independent and changes the nature of the middle manager's role. Sachs (2001) wrote about the notion of democratic professionalism and, when combined with theory connected to 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999), it provides a view of lecturers needing to be supported and nurtured, with the role of the manager being to provide an environment in which this can occur. Given previous research into 'underground learning' (James and Diment, 2003:407) and the fact that lecturers often do far more for students than can be adequately codified, this role could be viewed as a crucial part of the middle manager's job.

The background to this debate about the nature of professionalism is the 'benign neglect' that has typified the sector for much of its history (Lucas, 2004). This has created a culture whereby differing approaches to 'professionalism' have been allowed to thrive unchallenged. For many lecturers, their initial approach to this concept is rooted in their previous experience of work. With 90% of all teachers unqualified when first appointed (Orr and Simmons, 2010), new entrants to the sector often cling to notions of professionalism that were attached to their previous role and take these with them into their new career. Unlike schoolteachers, the majority of entrants into the sector have significant work experience prior to becoming a lecturer (LSIS, 2013) and, in consequence, they often look at the sector in the light of these experiences.

### **2.3.5 A sprawling professionalism**

This idea of clinging to previous knowledge rather than embracing anything new can be linked to the theory of threshold concepts, whereby it might be argued that the manager has failed to negotiate the portal into their new career (Meyer and Land, 2003). Instead, due to the absence of strong guidance from their new employers, their view of professionalism in the sector remains rooted in previous experiences. In addition to this, due to the diverse nature of the post-compulsory sector, there are likely to be a multiplicity of approaches to professionalism and so, for any manager trying to ensure that their team behaves in a way that they deem 'professional', this creates a challenge.

The previous system, whereby professionalism was left to individual colleges, was addressed with the introduction of compulsory teacher training qualifications, as discussed previously. This had been resisted by many in the sector, with opponents stressing the importance of subject knowledge as being the key determining factor of the quality of teaching (Harkin, 2005). This attitude was challenged after the standard of teaching in the sector was criticised by Ofsted (Bailey and Unwin, 2014). Subsequent changes were made by the Blair government, fundamentally changing the status of the lecturer in further education, in an attempt to address some of the criticisms. Whereas prior to the introduction of the Further Education Workforce Reforms (2007), the need for a teaching qualification was left to the judgement of the individual organisation and often the lecturers themselves, after 2007, the need for a qualification was enshrined in legislation (Orr and Simmons, 2010). In effect, the concept of 'professional judgement' was replaced by regulation by legislative bodies. This lack of autonomy has been noted by many lecturers who have moved from industry into the sector (Avis and Bathmaker, 2009).

The introduction of compulsory teacher training qualifications – later rescinded after the Lingfield report (Lingfield, 2012) – coupled with the changing nature of the sector, marked an attempt to introduce norms of professionalism to post-compulsory education that were then regulated by the state through quasi-autonomous bodies such as Ofsted, the LSC and latterly the SFA (Orr and Simmons, 2010). This ensured that the management of the sector was diluted to a measuring function against the

KPIs – simultaneously making it easier to measure success and give direction but also altering the relationship between managers and lecturers, whose previous ‘professional judgement’ function had been significantly altered.

As well as this change, the dual identity new lecturers often felt could be seen as a challenge to line managers. Simultaneously, new lecturers were viewed as trainees (when they were completing their teacher training qualification) but also as full members of staff (when they were away from their course) (Orr and Simmons, 2010). This created confusion, particularly as mentoring and support for new members of staff was often ‘patchy’ at best (Spenceley, 2007). Unlike in the majority of compulsory education, new lecturers are often expected to teach a full timetable and undertake full duties from the start of their employment; in short, they are viewed as full members of staff. This creates a sense of identity that often reflects the department within which they work as well as the norms of the sector. At the same time, however, they have an alternative identity – that of a trainee – and, as such, they are nurtured and encouraged to take risks. This disconnect between the clear and specific duties of being a member of staff and the less structured, ‘risk-taking’ culture espoused in many teacher training courses created both confusion and uncertainty amongst newer members of staff (Orr and Simmons, 2010). It is also mirrored when lecturers make the transition to a managerial role, a factor exacerbated by a lack of clear support for new managers (Spenceley, 2007).

This externally driven movement towards the imposition of professionalism was recognised by Lucas (2013), who contrasts the sector with other areas viewed as ‘professional’. Whilst within higher education, organisations are free to create their own curricula, the further education sector is bound by a large number of rules and regulations. This contrasts with one of the original aims of incorporation, which was to ‘free up the market’ (DfE, 1992) and also with the initial concept of professionalism that stresses the independence and self-regulatory role of participants.

The formation of the ETF does appear to provide an opportunity to re-establish a consistent form of professionalism within the sector. The ETF, whose constitution states that it is owned by its members, has the self-

regulatory function that is central to professional organisations. In addition, its first aim is to 'raise the quality and professionalism of teachers and trainers across the further education and training sector' (ETF, 2016). This provides optimism that the sector can embrace the freedom proposed by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). Although this might seem like an opportunity for self-regulation and a return to a view of professionalism more in keeping with that proposed by Furlong et al. (2000), the ETF website notes that the foundation is led by employers and this suggests that the stresses between the educational and managerial paradigm, addressed earlier, are still there. Indeed, a look at the priorities of the ETF shows that the only priority that stresses the needs of lecturers is listed as the final objective (ETF, 2015). This argument mirrors that of Lucas (2013), who talks about the gap between policy and actual outcomes. Given the complexity of the sector, this is a particular issue within post-compulsory education, whereby different organisations are operating in rather different markets.

An example of this complexity is given by Feather (2014), when talking about the teaching of higher education courses within a further education context. Defining professionalism within the sector has proved problematic in the past (Feather, 2009; Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler, 2005) due to the disparate nature of the sector, and Feather (2014) identifies the gap between the role of the lecturer within further education and their role within higher education. Whilst within the higher education sector, lecturers have considerable say in the process and practice of teaching, the strict controls imposed within colleges ensures that a more formulaic approach is used (O'Leary, 2013). In addition to this, Gleeson et al. (2015) talk about the balancing act the sector has to maintain when meeting the needs of the various stakeholders. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) stressed the primacy of the market and the need to meet the needs of the customers; however, this can be difficult. The twin demands of Ofsted's and employers' needs ensure that colleges often have to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (Gleeson et al., 2015) and, at times, these groups will have conflicting objectives.

Professionalism within the sector in the post-incorporation period remains a problematic concept and it is often used in a context that is far



removed from the view of a professional as one who has knowledge, autonomy and responsibility (Furlong et al., 2000). External attempts to classify professionalism within the sector by a series of rules and regulations have simplified the argument (Gleeson et al., 2015) or, alternatively, merely led to ‘managerialist positivism’ (Smith and O’Leary, 2013), whereby professionalism is shown via quantitative measures. This attempt to quantify the concept of professionalism was also criticised in the Lingfield report (2012) and although a stated objective of the ETF is to raise the level of professionalism, it is telling that the methods of doing so are rather broader than some of the previous methods. In addition, the notion of professionalism has been redefined in the post-incorporation period (Wilkins, 2010). The changes have created new challenges for managers as they have had to deal with a workforce that is far more controlled than previously. The narrowing definition of success within the sector (discussed in the role of the middle manager section) has meant that professional judgement has been replaced by clearer guidelines that need to be enforced. In addition to this, the dual professionalism approach outlined by Orr and Simmons (2010) needs to be managed, with new recruits needing to be supported in their training, but also managed to ensure that they complete the duties of a lecturer.

### **2.3.6 Professionalism and ethics in the sector**

The interaction between professionalism and what is seen as ethical within the sector is a key theme for many writers. Dennis and Walker (2016) talk about how ethics require discretionary space for managers to operate and make decisions based on their moral code of conduct (Peters, 2015). Bathmaker and Avis (2013) take up this theme and talk about the link between ethics and professionalism. The argument put forward is that workers in the sector have traditionally been guided by their own professional practice in deciding what is right or wrong; however, the ongoing discussion between the primacy of either teaching competencies or teacher competencies, and the shift from the latter to the former (European Commission, 2013), have changed the landscape in which managers are operating to one where KPIs have primacy. When the sector stressed the importance of teacher competencies, professionalism was

seen as something that was an inherent part of both the training and the sector as a whole, inculcated through constant exposure to fellow practitioners and their previous experiences (Orr and Simmons. 2010). The shift towards teaching competencies (European Commission, 2013) has led to a more regimented approach, where teaching is seen as a craft and hence there can be a prescribed way of doing it, and managers encourage, and in some cases enforce, this approach. This means that discretion is limited and hence ethics for both lecturers and managers are something that are part of the system they are instructed to run, rather than the emerging picture of individual ethics described by Dennis and Walker (2016).

This problem is especially true for newcomers to the sector, who might be bringing a view of professionalism (and indeed ethics) from a previous incarnation. This issue is taken up by Orr and Simmons (2010), who talk about the challenges faced by new teachers who are also enrolled on an initial teacher education course as students. The dual identity that this engenders can cause confusion and, when combined with any previous views of professionalism and ethics, newcomers to the sector can feel as though their values are being challenged. The literature suggests that this can cause a period of confusion when newcomers are going through this process: ‘...the transition also requires adaptation to value systems that are rarely made explicit and that may conflict with those associated with the previous career’ (Wood, Farmer and Goodall, 2016: 229).

## **2.4 The reframing of the sector: the changing perception of post-incorporation further education**

### **2.4.1 The twelve dancing princesses**

The image of the post-compulsory education phase as the ‘Cinderella sector’ (Baker, 1989) or the ‘neglected mittelkind’ (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2012) has recently been challenged as being detrimental to the sector. Daley, Orr and Petrie’s (2015) edited collection *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* puts forward a theory that, although the sector had been hamstrung by changes in government policy and also a lack of funding, to characterise the sector merely in these terms

is simplistic and often counterproductive (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015). Instead, it is important to recognise the qualities that exist within the sector. Coffield, writing in the introduction to the book, talks about the language that is used to describe the sector. Often, the phrases have negative connotations, especially when talking about current policy and the lack of funding within colleges. Words such as 'toxic', 'embattled' and 'cynicism' are used. However, Coffield argues that underneath this lies the true purpose of the sector and points out that many recent initiatives, often originating from individuals, or individual colleges, make mention of social justice, collegiate sharing of good practice and indeed professionalism. This all points to a sector that retains links to its original objectives, typified by pioneers such as Raikes, More and Birkbeck.

Orr, writing in the same book, suggests that neoliberalism 'has pervasive effects on ways of thought, to the point where it has been incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world' (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015, quoting Harvey, 2005:3). This is certainly true of many new recruits to the sector, who often focus on success in managerial terms (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2012). The evidence presented in the book, however, suggests that this approach, whilst still present, is an overly simplistic way of viewing the sector. The campaign to ensure that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) funding is maintained, detailed by Peutrell (writing in Daley et al, 2015), is an example of how the sector is still able to focus on the educational imperative and fight for issues that are not governed by strict neo-liberal principles.

#### **2.4.2 The changing nature of the sector**

The responsiveness of the sector is also something which presents both huge challenges and huge opportunities to middle managers in the sector. A recent example of this would be the introduction of significant amounts of higher education into further education. Kadi-Hanifi and Elliott (2016) talk about the need to integrate a new group of learners into the sector and the challenge of doing this with limited resources. Whilst the result is not always successful, as demonstrated by McTaggart (2016), who looked at the fit and expectations of HE students within an FE context, this has been

a key government policy. In many cases, the sector is expected by the government of the time to deliver and do so in a way that represents good value for money and is of a high quality, a challenge explored by Feather (2016).

Another challenge has been the increased casualisation of the sector that was noted by Gleeson and James (2007). The increase in part-time work and the use of 'instructors' rather than lecturers has meant that costs have been cut but it has ensured that managers have to balance the increased flexibility that this offers against the need to ensure that students are not disadvantaged if part-time members of staff are not available to answer questions, operating as they do in a more contractual-defined relationship (Gleeson and James, 2007).

In summary, incorporation and what followed has had a significant effect on the post-compulsory education sector. The neo-liberalist values that lay behind the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) encouraged colleges to break free from the constraints of the local education authority and embrace the market economy. The effect of this is disputed by the literature, with many authors arguing that there was a direct link between incorporation and the 'terrors of performativity' identified by Ball (2003). This focus on specific goals led to the compliance culture described by Silverman (2008) and a changing paradigm for people within the sector. Whilst this might be true, it is important to be reminded that the period before incorporation was itself fraught with difficulties and inefficiencies (Simmons, 2008). Since incorporation, the role of the middle manager has evolved to embrace an entrepreneurial part that was not necessarily there before. This has been enacted under the recent introduction of austerity measures and the result has been a change in the approach, and role, of colleges (Corbett, 2017). This has impacted on middle managers and has resulted in either the constraints of performativity or an embracing of the market, depending on the writer's perspective.

## **2.5 Defining the role of the middle manager within the post-compulsory sector**

### **2.5.1 Defining ‘management’ and ‘leadership’**

Within the post-compulsory sector, there is a tendency to label roles and view them as separate entities; indeed, in many colleges much time is spent describing and defining the various job titles. Corbett (2017) discusses how the roles of lecturers and managers ‘are often seen as distinct separates’ (Corbett, 2017:2011); indeed, when transitioning, participants are expected to adopt the characteristics of the new role (Page, 2013). In effect, they are seen as having ‘moved over’ to a different identity (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). This has led to defined descriptions of each role that do not always reflect the reality. The same approach can be seen when attempting to define ‘management’ and ‘leadership’, with the two words seemingly being used interchangeably in many situations. The purpose of this section is to reflect on the definitions adopted within the sector as well as to look at the crossover between the two terms. It will focus specifically on the role rather than the person, which will be examined in section 3.6.

### **2.5.2 Defining educational leadership**

When looking at the concept of leadership within the post-compulsory education sector, although the amount of literature that specifically focuses on this aspect of post-compulsory education is limited, by drawing on general leadership literature and that related to compulsory education, a picture of the role emerges.

Turning first to a generic definition of leadership, Yukl (2002) noted the following:

Most definitions of Leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a social influence process whereby intentional influence is exerted by one person [or group] over other people [or groups] to structure the activities and relationships in a group or organisation.

(Yukl, 2002:2)

There are two key elements to this definition of leadership: the social side and the influence, which would normally be towards a goal or vision (Cuban, 1988). Turning to the first part, Yukl's (2002) reference to the social function is pertinent in a sector where funding cuts have meant that in many organisations, the goodwill of the employees is crucial in maintaining the service (Tickle, 2014), and hence a key function of a leader is to convince, inspire, encourage and influence people towards the end goal (Northouse, 2017). This links in well with the motivational theory posited by Pink (2009), who writes about the importance of autonomy, mastery and a sense of purpose when talking about good leadership. Given that Ramsankar (2014), Mintzberg (2009) and others have maintained that motivation, and leadership in general, is an individual construct, it is clear that Yukl's (2002) assertion of the importance of a social element when influencing people towards a vision is a good starting point for any definition of leadership.

The second part of Yukl's (2002) definition, that of influence, is also a key element within education. Bush (2008), Southworth (1993) and others have talked about this within compulsory education as a way of helping schools achieve the nationally set targets, which gives the school an overarching purpose. Applied to the post-compulsory education sector, it can be seen to be relating to the entrepreneurial function that Beresford and Michels (2014) talk about as being necessary for successful educational establishments. In short, it refers to the process of creating a vision for employees and encouraging people to pursue the same goal (Cuban, 1988). The vision in many colleges is also about helping lecturers see what is important, especially in a sector where change acceleration, or the rate of change, is significant (Wilson and Lefton, 2015), and organisations have to react quickly in order to meet targets.

Many lecturers complain about educational bureaucracy (Walsh, 2006) and hence see leadership as something that goes beyond the bureaucratic or administrative tasks that are perceived as being prevalent. Leadership is seen as something that encourages participants to work towards a common vision (Bush, 2008) and a role which focuses on influence rather than implementation. This focus on vision (and its association with a social aspect) is confirmed by Davies (2005), who describes leadership as

something that relates to the future direction and the way in which those working in the educational establishment are inspired to reach the vision.

When defining leadership, it is important to note that there are many different approaches to it. Fullan (2001) describes how differing leadership styles can influence the culture and also the success of the organisation, with styles as diverse as an autocratic approach through to an affiliative form being appropriate in differing situations (Fullan, 2001). This theme is taken up by Northouse (2017), who describes how leaders (and indeed this can be extended to managers) adopt situational leadership techniques rather than a homogeneous approach to their role. Nevertheless, there is sufficient literature to confirm that vision and influence are two key aspects to use when attempting to define the concept.

### **2.5.3 Defining educational management**

Turning next to management, Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) define educational managers as people who ensure the smooth running of the organisation. Cuban (1988) puts this succinctly when he describes the role as one that is about ‘maintaining efficiently and effectively, current organisational arrangements’ (Cuban, 1988: xx). Bennis and Nanus (1985) take up this argument and suggest that management differs from leadership in that it is focused on achieving specific goals rather than wider visions. This task- oriented approach is also mentioned by Northouse (2017), who writes that management is about maintaining order and stability within the organisation.

Linking this to English post-compulsory education, the connections to the ‘supervisory’ and ‘bridging and brokering’ roles (Busher and Harris, 1999) within the sector are obvious. More recent research by Briggs (2004) confirms the importance of the operational side of the role, as well as the achievement of KPIs, in the life of the manager. This focus on the operational side of the organisation is common within educational management literature. Lumby (1999) identifies the students as a manager’s most important priority and those surveyed in the research saw their job as maintaining the efficiency of the organisation as the best way

to ensure that they were looked after. Although there were different approaches to the role (Briggs, 2003), the focus on efficiency and specific goals was a common theme (Briggs, 2004).

Although there is an emphasis on defining a manager as someone who focuses on the day-to-day aspects of the organisation (Northouse, 2017), the theme of empowering those in managerial positions was taken up by Srivastava, Bartol and Locke (2006), who talk about the importance of ensuring that managers have a degree of autonomy. They make the distinction between the *practice* of managing in education (where they describe the bureaucratic tasks) and *displaying leadership skills* (which requires them to individualise tasks) and stress the importance of the latter. This begins to show an overlap with leadership, a point taken up by Alexiadou (2001), who describes educational managers as the active agents of change. Instead of a maintenance role, their job also involves translating the visions of leaders into reality, and so adopting this definition would suggest an overlap between the two words. Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) write about the changing roles managers have had within education in terms which also indicate that they operate as agents of change rather than merely ensuring efficiency.

It must be stressed, however, that this view of the empowered manager is not universal. Page, writing in Daley, Orr and Petrie (2015), argues that this does not always happen in post-compulsory education. He argues that managers within education must not be seen as a homogeneous group and that although some might view themselves as empowered, others would disagree. This theme is taken up by Weathersby (1999), whose study noted a clear difference between managers and leaders. Management, he argues, is about the allocation of scarce resources in order to achieve the objectives of the organisation (which shows clear links to Yukl's (2002) definition). In effect, it is about controlling. Leadership, on the other hand, requires the person to inspire those around them to a common goal or vision.

This difference helps to create a clear demarcation between the roles, although applying it to the post-compulsory education sector remains problematic. Gunter's (2004) assertion that the terms are often used interchangeably is a pertinent one, as is his suggestion that there has been a switch in terminology in the sector from 'management' to 'leadership',



yet no equivalent switch in roles. The empowerment of individuals that the term 'leadership' brings – as described by Southworth (1993) – is something that is much talked about; however, the reality appears to be that whilst empowerment is often a perception by the individual, rather than something that can be measured (Avidov-Ungar, Friedman and Olshtain, 2013), the tasks of management remain similar, even with a change in title.

So, whilst accepting the idea that empowerment within management is possible, the definition suggested by Cuban (1988) represents a good starting point for any discussion of the term 'management'.

#### **2.5.4 The link between leadership and management**

The use of language is also crucial when trying to describe the functions of management and leadership. The word 'leader' has many positive connotations (Northouse, 2017) and is seen as something which creates aspirations rather than the maintenance of the current situation (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010). Turning back to Yukl's (2002) definition, there is an inculcated assumption in education that strong leadership (and the process of influencing employees) is a positive within the sector, a fact recognised by the transition in the language used to describe those in charge from educational management to educational leadership under previous governments (Gunter, 2004) in both departmental and local authority policy. Perhaps because of this, there is some evidence to suggest that the word 'leadership' is used to describe functions that might traditionally be described as 'management' duties. Yukl (2002) writes about how the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) and others (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005; Page, 2013) translate this to the field of education by stressing that the semantic difference is often an artificial one.

The majority of the literature defines the difference between leadership and management as the former focusing on a vision for the future and the latter focusing on the maintenance of the organisation (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010). Whilst this is not a universal viewpoint – for example, Hoyle and Wallace (2005) identify the problem of defining vision in a

sector that is heavily influenced by central government – it does provide a useful starting point when trying to differentiate between the two roles.

The overlap between the two words can be seen when looking at the realities of the job. Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) describe leadership as a process whereby a person exerts influence in order to achieve a certain goal. This links to Yukl's (2002) description of the importance of influence when leading, and also with Northouse's (2017) view that a key role of the leader is to ensure that there is a common view from employees. However, in some cases, this description might accurately be used to describe a manager in the post-compulsory sector. As well as Alexiadou's (2001) assertion that managers can be a key part of change management, 'management' is sometimes confused with 'managerialism' (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010), which is a far narrower term. In reality, managers are often not merely involved in the maintenance that Cuban (1988) describes. Corbett (2017) describes their role as being 'translating the strategic vision into an operational reality' (Corbett, 2017: 211), a role that goes beyond maintenance and, when linked to Busher and Harris's (1999) transformation role, confirms the overlap between the two words.

Despite the disparity in the understanding of the term, the majority of research concludes that roles we term 'management' roles involve some element of maintenance and efficiency whilst those we term 'leadership' involve change and vision, and that both roles are crucial for the effective running of the educational establishment (Cuban, 1988).

Hence, it is better to conclude that although leadership and management might be viewed as rather different roles, trying to ascribe one of these roles as a label to middle management is unhelpful, but as Bolman and Deal (1997) conclude, both are important.

Leading and managing are distinct, but both are important. Organisations which are overmanaged but underled eventually lose any sense of spirit or purpose. Poorly managed organisations with strong charismatic leaders may soar temporarily only to crash shortly thereafter. The challenge of modern organisations requires the objective perspective of the manager as well as the flashes of vision and commitment wise leadership provides (Bolman and Deal, 1997: xiii-xiv).

### 2.5.5 The role of the middle manager

Following on from his assertion of the heterogeneity of the middle managers, Page (2013) describes the role in terms that mirror Busher and Harris's (1999) 'bridging and brokering' role. In effect, the manager's role is to ensure that both senior leadership and lecturers are happy with their decisions, and this means that they have to balance differing demands. The role ambiguity inherent in the job, which Murphy and Curtis (2013) discussed, also adds to the feeling of a role that requires a lot of differing skills, most notably that of 'spinning plates' (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). The differing paradigms that were discussed in the previous chapter are also a key factor in the success of the role. The primacy of the managerial paradigm (Hyland and Merrill, 2003) to senior managers is likely to be balanced by the educational paradigm that is central to the philosophical approach of many lecturers. This feeling of balancing a number of different priorities and also agendas can prove problematic:

[The] dichotomous approach to power and resistance often leads to the reification of one over the other..... This approach frames every employee as either a manager or managed, as either one engaged in subjugation or one who is being subjugated. As such, managers are conceptually excluded from resistance – they can't simultaneously subjugate and resist subjugation.

(Page, 2013 122).

Whilst accepting the basic premise of this argument, other writers would suggest that this is a rather simplistic view of the function (indeed Page (2015) argues that the homogeneity of middle managers is not something that should always be accepted). Shain and Gleeson (1998) have written about the concept of strategic compliance which frames the role of the middle manager in terms of a (quasi) autonomous person who will choose the battles that they will fight and will comply with the demands of senior managers, but only if there are consequences for not complying or it is in their interests to do so. This compliance is based on values which come from pre-incorporation ideals, although that argument has been challenged in recent years. Orr (2011), talking at the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training's* conference, argued that the seismic changes in the sector meant that it was becoming more difficult for managers to adopt

this approach and that the original concept needed to be modified to reflect their role. Given that (at the time of writing) incorporation occurred 25 years ago, the fact that the values of the sector before this event have been changed should not necessarily be viewed as surprising.

The idea of the heterogeneity of the middle manager within the sector has been taken up by many writers. Briggs (2006) defines the role of managers by their favoured activity; this may range from being a ‘Corporate Agent’ – someone who understands and takes part in the bigger picture within the college – to an ‘Implementer’ – someone who makes things happen (Briggs, 2006). This idea of a typology of middle managers was also taken up by Thompson and Wolstencroft (2013), who talked about middle managers falling into one of four categories, ranging from the ‘quixotic jugglers’, who are constantly trying to balance the various demands, to ‘lone warriors’, who are often idealists constantly fighting battles and who have a clear sense of what they want the role to look like. Recently, Dennis and Walker (2016) have taken up this idea and produced a slightly different typology but, again, one that focuses on the roles of the manager.

Whilst the various authors might differ in what they actually call the various groups of managers, it is clear that collectively they are diverse in their approaches and their day-to-day role.

#### **2.5.6 The multi-faceted middle manager**

Focusing specifically on the role of the middle manager, it is clear that this multi-faceted position has many complications. The role has traditionally been viewed as an ‘ideological buffer between senior managers and lecturers through which market reform is filtered in the FE workplace’ (Gleeson and Shain, 1999:462). This places the managers on the frontline of an ongoing battle between the educational paradigm (Ball, 2003) and the managerial paradigm (as defined by Randle and Brady, 1997) that occurs once the economic necessity of meeting KPIs is made paramount (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). This feeling of ‘bridging the gap’ is prevalent in much of the research carried out into this role (Briggs, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006) and is typified by a feeling that middle managers are seen as deliverers of KPIs rather than individuals in their own right

(Ainley and Bailey, 1997). In effect, the strategic role described by Lumby (1999) is rarely the dominant part of the job.

However, it would be wrong to say that all middle managers view themselves merely as ‘deliverers’. A minority of researchers suggest that middle managers see themselves in a different light. Page (2011:106) talks about the ‘elasticity of the role’. In effect, this relates to the idea that a middle manager can be stretched in many different ways but also that the role has a degree of autonomy: the middle manager has some choice in the way in which they are stretched. This suggests that Ainley and Bailey’s (1997) description of managers being parts of a machine is not necessarily always accurate. In a later work, Page (2015) talks about how managers (and middle managers in particular) use this autonomy in order to subvert any instructions that do not match their ideology, a process that ensures that they craft the job rather than merely follow instructions. This presents a differing approach to the established viewpoint espoused by Ball (2003) and others and, in many ways, fits with the original neo-liberal ethos of incorporation, whereby individual organisations (and, in this case, individuals within the organisation) are able to select their own priorities according to local need. It should be noted, however, that even in this rather more positive view of the role, the transition period and indeed the support offered to managers are seen as crucial. Page (2011) talked about the difficulties that new managers face when taking up their role and how this transition period needs to be carefully supported. The freedom described then occurs once the initial period has been navigated. If this transition period is not carefully handled, then the freedom that comes afterwards does not happen.

The crafting of the role, in the wake of incorporation, is a theme taken up by Elliott (2012) when he looks at the maintenance of an ethical and principled stand by middle managers in the face of ever-changing (and often externally set) priorities. The ‘moral art’ of leadership (Hodgkinson, 1991), which stresses the importance of ensuring that the ‘right’ decision is made irrespective of other pressures, becomes an ever more important approach to espouse in an era of KPIs and more tightly defined targets (Elliott, 2012). An example of this, as noted in the literature, has been in the widening participation agenda proposed by Kennedy (1997), which has

come under threat due to changing priorities and austerity cuts. Evidence from both Elliott (2012) and Peutrell (writing in Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015, talking specifically about the campaign to keep funding for ESOL classes) indicates that the relative independence of colleges post-incorporation can influence policy and whilst governmental priorities might encourage colleges (and indeed middle managers) to move funding elsewhere, this independence can ensure that alternative decisions can be made by managers where they see it is as the right thing to do.

Spillane (2006) argued that part of a middle manager's job was as a distributed leader. Communication between the top of the organisation and the bottom is seen as vital to ensure a consistent message is received and the role of the middle manager helps to ensure that the message reaches everyone and also that any miscommunication is corrected (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004). This is another example of where the line between leadership and management becomes blurred. The passing on of the message is likely to fall into the category of management as it relates to the smooth running of the organisation (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010); however, the 'selling' of the message that becomes part of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) falls into a category that refers to leadership (Northouse, 2017).

#### **2.5.7 Busher and Harris's view of the middle manager**

Busher and Harris (1999) have identified four dimensions to the middle management role. Specifically, these are 'bridging and brokering', 'a transformational dimension', 'supervisory management' and 'representative leadership', and these dimensions act as a useful starting point when we look at the day-to-day existence of middle managers. Although Busher and Harris (1999) were talking about leadership within a school, the roles are similar within the post-compulsory sector, although there is often a different emphasis on what is seen as important.

The 'bridging and brokering' role can be seen in the mediating of tensions that exist between the opposing paradigms (Shain and Gleeson, 1998) within a typical FE college. Many managers interviewed about the role talk of 'bridging the gap' (Briggs, 2006) between senior managers and the

lecturing staff. Indeed, middle managers often discuss the difficulties inherent in their job due to the fact they are being squeezed from the top by senior managers, who are keen that their ideas are implemented, and from the bottom by lecturers, who are often resistant to the rapid change demanded of them (Clarke and Newman, 1997, cited in Gleeson and Shain 1999: 466). In essence, the skills of diplomacy and persuasion are needed in order to succeed (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013).

Busher and Harris's (1999) second element, the 'transformational dimension', is often difficult to find in the job description of a middle manager within the post-compulsory sector. Within departments, this dimension, when related to staff development, is at best tolerated and often suppressed. The 'transformational dimension' for lecturers stresses creativity and indeed autonomy (Busher and Harris, 1999), concepts which run contrary to the performative approach that is evident in many colleges. Lecturers new to the profession, whose training stresses the importance of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1999) amongst staff, are often surprised by the hierarchical structure that exists within many departments in the sector (Spenceley, 2007), which is reinforced by managers stressing the importance of reaching targets for the department as efficiently as possible.

The more general 'supervisory management' role is also one that is recognisable in the sector. Many new lecturers are surprised (and often dismayed) that the concept of professionalism is underdeveloped in colleges, and the lack of control and autonomy is often cited as one of the main areas for discontent (Avis and Bathmaker, 2009). The shifting nature of the relationships within post-compulsory education can be summarised by the fact that tutors are now viewed as 'trusted servants rather than...empowered professionals' (Avis, Kendal and Parsons, 2003:239). This switch in emphasis has ensured that compliance has become a key theme of the supervisory part of the middle manager's role (Silverman, 2008), often described by the umbrella term 'quality assurance'. This compliance-based approach asks the manager to check whether certain tasks have been completed and brings to mind a foreman checking a production line, rather than a professional relationship between middle manager and lecturers. This is in direct contrast to the

more idealistic views that new lecturers bring to the sector (Maxwell, 2009). It could be argued that this is a downgrading of the professional status of both lecturers and managers (Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler, 2005). It should be noted that not all middle managers fall into this compliance category (Page, 2011), although failure to do so does tend to have consequences. Page (2011) talks about fundamentalist managers who always put teaching first and are often in direct conflict with the compliance culture noted. Interestingly, people falling into this category within the typology still view themselves as ‘teachers’ rather than ‘managers’, perhaps suggesting that simply talking about a transition from lecturer to manager is overly simplistic, a fact backed up by the strong positive correlation between the hours taught and the strength of the conviction that the educational paradigm remained paramount (Page, 2011).

‘Representative leadership’ remains a key part of the role (Busher and Harris, 1999). This stresses the importance of being a figurehead for the department, both inside and outside the organisation. Inside the organisation, the middle manager is often judged by KPIs that tend to stress student success above all other factors (Briggs, 2007), whilst outside the organisation, achievements are often described in rather more nebulous terms. This means that in the neo-liberalist quasi-market that has followed incorporation, the ‘representative leadership’ role for middle managers has changed. Inside the organisation, the role often amounts to merely being accountable to senior managers regarding the KPIs, whilst outside the organisation, the focus is on exploring new areas of provision and liaising with relevant stakeholders in order to expand the department’s scope and ensure that new revenue streams are available (Smith, 2007). Although the external role might be said to be less bounded by the rules of performativity, the stress on financial indicators means that the managerial paradigm remains the dominant approach, even in these situations.

### **2.5.8 Leadership and management – a summary**

In summary, the literature suggests that there is a clear distinction between leadership and management, with the former focusing on



establishing both a vision and using a social aspect to influence others, whilst the latter is more interested in the efficiency of the operational aspects of the organisation. The reality, however, is rather different, with a clear overlap being seen from the empirical evidence. This overlap is often reflected in the wording used for the role. The shift of language from 'management' to 'leadership' has reflected the changes in role post-incorporation. Busher and Harris (1999) provide a useful framework for the role and it is clear that the 'bridging and brokering' part of the role is the one that occupies most of the middle manager's time. This focuses on the implementation of the ideas passed down by senior managers and entails ensuring that there is compliance amongst lecturers and that KPIs are stressed at all times. This implementation role (which encompasses the 'supervisory management' element that Busher and Harris mention) ensures that the other elements of the role, whilst not completely forgotten, are viewed as being less vital than the other two parts of the role. It should be noted, however, that there is some evidence (notably Page, 2011, 2013) that managers are able to craft their role in some way to ensure that their own needs and ideologies are met.

## **2.6 Self-identity and transitions**

Having looked at the role of the middle manager and concluded that the group is a heterogeneous collection of individuals, it is now important to move from the collective to the individual and look at the middle manager as a human being. The purpose of this section is to look at the concept of self-identity and then apply it to the role of the middle manager. A key part of this is an acceptance that self-identity is not a fixed construct for each person. In a post-industrial society, identity has become a key concept within social science, as has the idea of adopting multiple identities according to the situation. This will be examined with a focus on the individual as well as the impact a transition can have on self-identity and how managers can be helped through a state of liminality.

### **2.6.1 The construction of self-identity**

The concept of identity has been defined as ‘The ways in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multi-dimensional and evolving ways’ (Ecclestone, 2007:4) and, as such, it is important to recognise that identity is both not necessarily a stable concept and that it is influenced by a variety of factors (Ferguson, 2009). Breaking down that definition, there are a number of factors which make up the construct of an individual’s self-identity.

Firstly, the environment in which an individual exists can have an impact on self-identity. Bimrose and Brown (2010) talk about how many workers define and understand themselves (at least in part) via their work, and how this can act as a psychological anchor to their lives. For other writers, this is also a key part of identity and helps us understand ourselves and how others view us (Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2002; Hodkinson et al. 2004). Whilst this psychological anchor might bring some stability to our identity, there is a danger that if the anchor is only connected to work, it can have the effect of holding individuals in chains, whereby they are unwilling to make a transition due to their comfort in the psychological frame of reference in which they find themselves (Bimrose and Brown, 2010).

Secondly, Ecclestone’s (2007) definition talked about the multi-dimensional approach to self-identity and this also helps us understand its construction. Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical approach described how self-identity evolves through interpersonal interaction and how, sometimes, individuals may ‘perform’ in order to project a desirable image. This means that self-identity is constructed of both ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ elements (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013) and both are present when looking at the whole. Goffman (1959) describes the front stage elements in terms akin to an actor playing a part and presenting a self-identity to the audience. In recent times, this has become even more accentuated by the rise in social media, with individuals being able to construct an identity online, without having to confront the challenges that are inherent when carrying out face-to-face interpersonal interactions (Hogan, 2010). In extreme cases, this can lead to ‘identity tourism’,

whereby participants adopt a different persona, attitudes or even gender (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013:103).

The individual's 'front stage' presentation of their self-identity is not the full picture, with the 'back stage' self also being important (Goffman, 1959). This goes beyond the self-presentation that is implied in the 'front stage' part (Brown, 1998) and refers to our behaviour when nobody is looking. Sometimes we use this time to practise our 'front stage' behaviour and ensure that we are ready for our next 'performance' (Goffman, 1959). In other cases, our behaviour 'front stage' might contrast with that which we display when not interacting with specific people. Houts (2004), talking about racial prejudice in America, contrasts the public pronouncements of leading figures with their behaviour away from a microphone to highlight inconsistencies as an example of the way in which self-identity is a multi-faceted concept.

The two elements identified by Goffman (1959) can clearly be seen when looking at the construction of identity within a middle manager. Corbett's (2017) assertion that when transitioning from the lecturer role to management, a new persona needed to be adopted indicates a change in the 'front stage' behaviour, a view backed up by Page (2013), who talked about the public demands of managers. The interaction with others often causes changes in the nature of self-identity, especially when the individual has an objective in mind (Goffman, 1978) and when work is used as the psychological anchor (Bimrose and Brown, 2010).

### **2.6.2 Fluid self-identity**

The construction of self-identity that Goffman (1959) talked about does not provide the complete picture of self-identity. Self-identity is not necessarily a fixed construct and can be influenced by our genetics, our cultural references, those around us, our previous experiences lived, and our current life (Palmer, 2010; Ahlgreen and Tett, 2010). This is a theme taken up by Bauman (2000), who discussed the concept of 'liquid modernity'. His argument, that nothing keeps its shape in 'postmodern' society and society is a fluid construct, may be applied to the multiple forms of management discussed in the literature (Dennis and Walker,

2016; Briggs, 2007). It may also be applied to self-identity, where establishing a durable identity over an extended period of time is problematic (Bauman, 2000). This is especially true in a volatile sector such as post-compulsory education.

Many factors that influence self-identity are not fixed and this impacts on how we view ourselves and means that it can change. This does not just refer to the changes identified by Corbett (2017) and Page (2013). Instead, changes in work might cause anxiety and a crisis within an individual's self-identity; this may be reflected both in the 'front stage' and 'back stage' identities and can impact on all aspects of the person's life.

A change in self-identity is not necessarily a negative event; for example, returning to education after a period of absence might impact positively on self-identity and may be a transformative tool (Merrill, 2009). Whilst there are plenty of examples that suggest that the transformative power of education is strong, it is important to stress that the habitus to which the individual is connected remains a strong pull on their self-identity (Bourdieu, 1990). In effect, by making a transition to a new role, the individual is exposed to a new set of circumstances that might affect the way in which they perceive their expectations, values and dispositions.

Giddens (1991) described the importance of reclaiming yourself after a transition (in the initial example he gave, it was a divorce) and it is clear that this idea could also be used to describe the process involved in making the transition from lecturer to manager.

### **2.6.3 The impact of transition on self-identity**

The concept of a transition is of great importance when looking at the movement of lecturers from their role as facilitators of learning to their role as a manager of learning, as that can have a significant impact upon their self-identity. A transition, which can be described as implying '...a change and movement from one identity, self and situation to another' (Merrill, 2009:9), necessitates a re-evaluation of role and of identity. There can be an iterative element to any transition (Biesta and Tedder, 2008), whereby there are likely to be several, repeatable steps that mark the journey through the transition. This suggests that it might be possible

to predict the stages an individual goes through and hence plan for the transition. Although, in contrast, it is important to note that a transition is not necessarily the same as a simple movement or transfer (Ecclestone, 2007). Indeed, it involves something rather deeper than that and the use of the word 'identity' is crucial in any discussions involving transitions, hence suggesting that planning might prove rather more difficult than first thought. It is also important to note that transitions may be either positive or negative and although a positive transition might not be seen as being a problem, it is still possible that an individual might well need support getting through it.

A transition can happen at any time during an individual's life, although there are specific times when these changes are more likely to take place. The transition from primary school to secondary school, from college to university and from full-time education to employment are examples of such events, but of more importance to this study is the transition that takes place when a person moves between jobs (Levinson and Levinson, 1996). Transitions of this nature can lead to profound change (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) and have a significant impact on the self-identity of an individual (Field, 2012; Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 20010). The increasingly volatile nature of employment identified by Ecclestone (2007) has also had an impact on transition, with the concept of a 'job for life' no longer being the norm and hence transitions becoming more common (Folke, Hake and Schedler, 2004). This has necessitated employees having to take a more flexible approach to their working lives, with transitions becoming more frequent (although not necessarily any easier). This issue of transition was addressed within an education context by Kennedy (1997), with the emergence of the importance of lifelong learning becoming a trigger for increased study of transitions. Some research has identified that although life transitions have become prevalent and markedly more predictable, for example the death of a parent tends to occur during middle age and is viewed as a predicted transition (Winsborough, 1980), they still require careful management to better prepare people for the life course marker when it occurs (George, 1993).

#### **2.6.4 Supporting transition**

The need for support mentioned earlier has been well documented by a range of writers, including by Ecclestone (2007), who identified the difficulty of making transitions and the need to manage this process. Interestingly, she specifically mentions adults who might be deemed to be vulnerable or disaffected as needing additional support (Ecclestone, 2007). Whilst these terms have been used in another context, it does echo research completed regarding the transition lecturers make when moving from a teaching role to management and how new managers may be viewed as vulnerable (Briggs, 2001; Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). The problems associated with poor (or absent) mentoring for new lecturers is well documented (Spenceley, 2007) and it is clear that this support is also important for lecturers making the transition to management. Ecclestone (2007) describes the establishment of peer mentoring and buddy schemes to help the process and to support a process that is seen as ‘...inherently unsettling, daunting and risky’ (Ecclestone, 2007: 1).

The transition process may be viewed as transformative in nature (Mezirow, 1997) and, as such, new norms need to be established due to a shift in the frames of reference of the person. The move to management – which has been described as ‘moving to the dark side’ (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) – necessitates a change of cognitive, emotional and social paradigms that research (Briggs, 2001) suggests participants are not prepared for, a concern given the fact that transitions often involve navigating setbacks or processes of unbecoming (Ecclestone, 2007). Given the performative nature of much of the sector (Ball, 2003), a lack of support is likely to be disorientating for any newcomer within their workplace and that feeling might well affect the other domains identified. Bimrose and Brown (2010, in Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) describe how a transition in one area of an individual’s life will alter perceptions in other areas. They also suggest that the process of giving up one identity for another (especially where an individual’s career is viewed as an anchor within their lives) requires careful management (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes 2010), a process that research suggests does not happen within the sector that is the subject of this research.

Training, when given, tends to focus on the work-based part of the job and often fails to address the cognitive, emotional and social paradigms (Briggs, 2001). Given that the transition is likely to change the way in which others perceive them (as earlier indicated by Beynon, 1975) and, in consequence, how they perceive themselves, this lack of preparation for the transition can have serious consequences. Indeed, the unrealistic view of the transition that new managers are often presented with before they make the transition means that the adjustment to the new role is made even more challenging.

There have been criticisms of the theory of transformative learning (Collard and Law, 1989; Welton, 1993) and the view that all managers go through the same process is rather simplistic; indeed, it must be stressed that other factors will affect the process, such as family circumstances, expectations, emotional resilience and any training that has been provided (Collard and Law, 1989). This ensures that providing support and training is not a simple process, as each person will require something that is tailored for their own specific needs. As mentioned, however, not addressing this factor can have significant consequences for the success of the manager in their new role.

#### **2.6.5 Transition and liminality for middle managers**

The transitioning between jobs and identities, identified by Corbett (2017), can cause problems for the self-identity of managers. Some new managers will be in a state of liminality, whereby they are trapped in a suspended state of partial understanding of their new role. The switch in role means that new experiences overlay previous experiences, causing a lack of understanding and, in many cases, confusion:

Liminality is of course an ontological state, and must not therefore be confused with disaffection or disenchantment with a course, which can have numerous unconnected causes, and yet such disaffection is a likely correlate of being in an uncomfortable liminal state, with real-world consequences for students, staff and institutions.

(Atherton, Hadfield and Wolstencroft, 2012:2)

Whilst it could be argued that the transition to manager is complex and that there is no simple way of supporting people through it (Cousin, 2006), there are ways of moving managers onwards from a preliminal state. Support and guidance can help, as can a clear understanding that any journey towards a postliminal state is not going to be a smooth transformation (Land, Meyer and Baillie, 2010). Whilst managers might not be the fragile learners Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) talk about, support through to the postliminal state is often needed for any transition (Bimrose and Brown, 2010) and should be put in place.

Briggs (2007) stressed the importance of the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of the role. However, for new managers, the switch of role is not always accompanied by relevant or timely training in the demands of the job (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) which can impact on the journey to a postliminal state. Avis and Bathmaker (2006a) have written extensively about the importance of preparing new lecturers for these elements but it is clear that in many parts of the sector, this element is underdeveloped. This is particularly true of the emotional impact of a transition into the sector, which can have a significant impact on identity.

The lack of support for new entrants into the sector has been noted in a number of studies (Spenceley, 2007; Avis and Bathmaker, 2006b, 2009; Orr, 2012) and is mirrored when looking at the support new middle managers are given. Although, as has been previously noted, new managers should not be treated as one homogeneous body, it is clear that there are specific skills that are needed for the job and what is also needed is the support for the emotional elements of the job. Briggs (2007) talks about how middle managers are often aware of where their skills are lacking and yet few colleges have formal procedures in place to provide bespoke training for individual managers. Crawley (2015) identifies strategies for professionals within the sector to ensure that they are supported, and a key element is the network of contacts that are built up over a period of time. He uses the term 'connected professional' to describe this approach. Whilst this is a valid suggestion and one that is of great help, it should be noted that this needs to be built up over a period of time, and support in the transition period is still needed or the anchoring effect of the job can adversely affect self-identity.



There is some evidence that sometimes mentoring can be used to great effect. Thompson (2016) talks about the way in which new lecturers are mentored and supported to develop their potential; however, even in these accounts, there is still a strong element of mentoring being ‘fitted in’ rather than being central to the process, a fact picked up by Ofsted (2003) in their report on the sector. Although this report is now slightly dated, the reoccurrence of mentoring within Ofsted’s inspection reports suggests that little has changed for either lecturers or managers.

Why there is a lack of support has been debated within the sector. The lack of money and time is an obvious factor but Pask and Joy (2007) talked about the skills needed to provide support. These include requiring rational and emotional competencies such as the ability to analyse, problem-solve and raise awareness of issues. These skills often need a structured training programme and time to reflect (Thompson, 2016), a situation that rarely occurs within the sector (Jones and Straker, 2006). When this is put in place, the focus is often on processes and paperwork rather than the softer skills that are often needed (Eliahoo, 2009).

A key element of the middle manager’s job is the organisation and motivation of staff (Briggs, 2005a) yet there is little evidence that managers are provided with any support in this area. Whilst it is acknowledged that the ‘emotional practice’ of education (Hargreaves, 1998) will affect the self-identity of each manager in a different way, the lack of support in this area is in sharp contrast with the training given on specific procedures. The importance of ‘the bottom line’ is clear when looking at the amount of training that new managers are given on specific, business elements (Smith, 2007).

The majority of managers are recruited internally, and if not internally to the college, then from the sector; indeed, Loots and Ross (2004) suggest that almost 80% of college principals hold a teaching qualification. This again stresses the need for training and support to be put in place as lecturers move to managerial positions. New managers need to switch from an educational paradigm to a more managerial paradigm and although in post-incorporation further education, the edges have been blurred between the two paradigms, it is clear that there is little support for those making the transition (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013).

### **2.6.6 Cognitive dissonance**

One by-product of the transition that managers make is that cognitive dissonance may occur when their actions within their new role do not conform with their established belief structure (Festinger, 1957). Whilst some training for new staff members is focused on reducing the disparity evident in cognitive dissonance (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2008), this is not always the case. This leads to situations where people are attempting to justify actions and approaches that appear to differ from those approaches they have espoused before. Whilst this in itself is not a problem, the problems of behaving in a way that is contrary to a core belief structure tend to lead to an individual struggling with their self-identity (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959) and this can lead to increased stress, anxiety or worry (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2008).

Whilst this theory is not universally accepted – indeed, Steele (1988) talked about how dissonance tended to be related to self-image rather than self-identity – it does help to illustrate the problems managers might experience in a performative culture (Ball, 2003). This has been addressed in some training received, whilst Simon, Greenberg and Brehm (1995) argued that cognitive dissonance could be reduced by focusing on other personal values, which reduces the individual's need to think about the original task.

## **2.7 Theoretical Perspectives – Roles, Responsibilities, Transitions and Identities**

Having reviewed the literature, the next section will look at the theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks that will be used throughout the work and how they interrelate to each other. Firstly, the work of Busher and Harris (1999) will be examined; this looks at the role of the middle manager and the established makeup of the job and will be used as a conceptual framework for the research. Secondly, the concepts and theories associated with self-identity in a time of transition will be looked at. Drawing on the work of Field, Ecclestone, Jenkins and others, it will outline how changes in role affect the individual. These two perspectives will be analysed in detail throughout the work.

### **2.7.1 Outline of the theoretical perspectives used**

At this point, it is important to clarify the theoretical perspectives that will be used within this study in order to give structure and meaning to the work. Due to the lack of previous research within this area, it has been necessary to use two different approaches to provide background and to provide structure to the work, as well as to act as a model that will help me frame and test the findings. These approaches each address one specific part of the research and together they interrelate to provide a rich picture of the middle manager role.

Firstly, the work of Busher and Harris (1999) will provide a framework to the role of the middle managers as defined by a previous study. This framework will look at the practical tasks of the manager as well as the expectations associated with the role. Secondly, the literature related to self-identity during transitions will be used to explore how managers see themselves, as well as how others see them.

In short, the framework will provide information on what managers do (via Busher and Harris) and who they are (via the literature on self-identity), and this will then be used to explore where and how managers operate.

There is clear connectivity between the frameworks. Previous research – most notably Briggs (2006) but more recently Dennis, Walker and Springbett (2017) – has focused on the role of the manager; however, this is almost always related to the practicalities of the role rather than the reasons why managers acted in a particular way or the impact it had on them. This task-based approach is a useful one when giving background about the landscape within which managers work; however, it is limiting as it fails to look at the human part of the role. Given that this research is based around the experiences of middle managers, it is important to look at how the self-identity of new appointments changes.

A range of literature has been used to look at self-identity – including Ecclestone (2002), Field (2006), Jenkins (2014) and Bimrose and Brown (2010) – and this framework will be used to look at the changes that promotion has on the self-identity of the managers and how the tasks that Busher and Harris (1999) describe impact on that identity. Illeris (2014)

identifies that changes, and particularly transformative changes, have an impact on not only the cognitive functions of people but also the emotional makeup of people. This means that combining the first two frameworks – the ‘what’ and ‘who’ parts – gives a fuller picture of the human impact of the transition rather than merely presenting a list of tasks that need to be completed.

Together, these two frameworks will be used to explore not just the defined role of the middle manager but also the managers themselves.

## **2.8 Busher and Harris – the role of middle managers**

Busher and Harris (1999) identify four key dimensions to the role and the balance between the four elements helps to explain the changing nature of the job. Although their work was focused on compulsory education, the convergence between the two sectors means that it remains highly relevant. This convergence, typified by the decision to equalise QTLS with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in 2012, has ensured that the previously fractious relationship between the two sectors has changed to one that could be described as cautious cooperation. This process has also been influenced by the change of school leaving age to 18, ensuring that greater cooperation between the two sectors can be beneficial to both compulsory and post-compulsory providers when they are ensuring that there are coherent and manageable options available for students to select.

The four elements that Busher and Harris (1999) identify will be used to identify and categorise the roles identified within the research. The first category is ‘bridging and brokering’, which refers to the transactional leadership within education; this can be vital for middle managers as they are often charged with enacting the plans of the senior managers whilst ensuring that teachers are able to focus on what happens in the classroom. The second element is ‘a transformational dimension’, which is the process of encouraging those working in the organisation to adapt creative approaches and continually look for improvements both in themselves and in the teaching in general. The ‘supervisory management’ role might be described as the traditional role of a manager whilst the final role, ‘representative leadership’, requires the manager to represent their

department both inside and outside the organisation. In many ways, these roles could be linked to the roles already identified for the sector in the most recent report on the sector (ETF, 2016).

These four areas will be used to frame the questionnaires and interviews. The research will look at whether the framework Busher and Harris (1999) put forward can be adopted as an accurate description of the role of a middle manager within post-compulsory education. Answers given by participants will be analysed to see whether they can be grouped into the four areas and the work will also help us understand how (and where) support can be offered. If the responses do not conform with the original framework, then this will help to inform a new framework.

Further to this descriptive focus on the various aspects of the role, Busher and Harris's work can also be used as a framework in which to look at the balance of work completed by participants and also the perceived importance of each part. When looking at middle managers within the compulsory sector, research suggested that the four categories varied in importance according to the individual manager, the part of the academic cycle the manager was interviewed in and also a range of other factors that were specific to the participant (Busher and Harris, 1999). Briggs (2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006) suggests that the supervisory element was dominant and this research will look at whether that is still the case, given the changes in the sector that have taken place since Briggs' research. Many of the changes, most notably the formation of the ETF in 2013, have had the stated aim of raising the professionalism (and indeed the status) of the sector, which, at least in theory, might impact on the balance between the four roles.

When selecting a practical framework for defining the role of the manager within the sector, there are alternative choices. The work of Dennis and Walker (2016), Leader (2004) and Alexiadou (2001) all offer alternative approaches to the framework chosen. The drawback of the other frameworks, however, is that they tend to focus on one specific area of the manager's role rather than a general framework. Hence, Dennis and Walker (2016) view the role through an ethical lens whilst Leader focuses on their relationship with senior managers and how they influence the decision-making process.

By using Busher and Harris (1999), a more general viewpoint can be gained as it is designed as a framework for the role, rather than the role as perceived by participants or in relation to a specific function within the organisation. This means that it is applicable to the complete spectrum of organisations that fall into the category of ‘post-compulsory education’.

## **2.9 Self-identity during life transitions**

The second perspective that will underpin the work is the concept of life transitions. The idea of a change that is deeper than a mere change of job (Ecclestone, 2007) typifies the experience of many new managers. The feeling of moving not just jobs but also paradigms has been noted by previous research (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) and is the source of much of the concern that new managers feel when starting the job. As discussed earlier, the move to middle management necessitates a wider perspective on the organisation and a requirement to understand organisation-wide objectives as well as developmental ones. Research within the area of transitions also stresses the importance of the support needed during the process and this has been noted by many writers as being a weakness within the sector (Spenceley, 2007). In addition to this, the concept of life transitions also refers to identity and self-biography (Jenkins, 2014) and this will be used to map the journey new managers make.

The notion of transitions is central to much of this work and it is important that this is defined as part of this framework. Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson and Crosnoe (2003: 8) define this as ‘a substantial change in the direction of one’s life, whether subjective or objective’. Whilst this acts as a good starting point, it is important to recognise that a transition is not something that tends to be an immediate event. Instead, it may be viewed as a process and hence specific mention will be made to the ‘in-between state’ that is inherent when defining any transition. Field (2006) noted the fluidity of everyday life, making it seem as though we are constantly in a period of transition, but whilst this may be true, he also talked about non-normative transitions, which a promotion to a managerial position might fit in with.

This idea of transitioning into a new position dates back to role theory (Linton, 1936) and encompasses concepts such as a specified role and also socialisation into a role. Whilst this is undoubtedly important, Ebaugh (1988) reminds us that the exit from a previous role is also something that is an important stage that people go through and hence this will also be looked at within this work.

Given that much of the research into the area has stressed the ad hoc approach to recruitment and support prevalent within the sector (Spenceley, 2007), the concept of how the transition is managed is likely to become central to this work. The profound changes in perception (both of yourself and how others see you) that transitions can cause, identified by Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010), needs to be carefully managed as the transition will affect not just the professional persona of the individual but also other parts of their lives. When moving jobs, many managers have spoken about the change in their perspective of life and this affects factors outside the organisation. This link to stress – also identified by George (1993) – will also be part of the framework used within this study.

The career structure within the sector is significantly less formalised than in many businesses. Concepts such as ‘talent management’, ‘succession planning’ and ‘career management’ (Yukl, 2002) are rarely used within the post-compulsory education sector and hence there is a feeling that transitions are managed in a less structured manner. Bimrose and Brown (2010) note the impact a transition has on an individual, and it is important to use this framework to explore aspects that extend beyond the confines of the workplace. Hence, as detailed in the methodology section, in Chapter 4, a semi-structured interview approach will be used once the initial data collection via questionnaires has been completed, in order to explore all of these aspects.

The notion of transition will also be used to examine issues that relate to the depth and permanence of any transformation. The concept of compliance (Silverman, 2008) tends to stress the importance of following orders. However, it is also important to look at whether middle managers believe in the veracity of what they are doing, a key feature of a successful organisation (Peters and Waterman, 1982), or whether they are merely ‘faking it’ (Felstead et al., 2010).

## **2.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored four themes within the literature review:

- 1) The role of the middle manager within the post-compulsory sector. This also focused on the complexities of defining ‘management’ and ‘leadership’ in the context of the sector. The overlap between the two terms is an important point to note as is the changing use of terminology that has occurred.
- 2) Performativity and the current post-compulsory education landscape. This also encompasses the move away from this approach that is being recognised.
- 3) The evolving concept of professionalism, and dual professionalism within the post-compulsory education sector. The various definitions were examined in order that they can be applied where necessary.
- 4) Transitions within education. A key concept here is self-identity for both lecturers and managers. The impact of the transition on self-identity was examined as well as differing views on how organisations can plan for the transition and its subsequent impact. The fluidity of identity as well as the support new middle managers need are key points here.

By looking at these themes, it is clear that there are a number of debates that lie at the heart of the argument over the future (and the current state) of the sector. Firstly, it is clear that ‘middle managers’ are not a homogeneous group and to treat them as such is both misleading and likely to lead to a misunderstanding of the role. Various typologies have been suggested and although the names vary, the ideas behind them stay constant. In effect, the conclusion is that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ middle manager. A further argument concerns the differences between leadership and management; this is especially true in light of the way in which the terms are used interchangeably in some contexts. Despite a lack of literature connected to the post-compulsory sector, analysis of generic and compulsory texts suggest that the terms do have differing meanings, despite the way in which they are used interchangeably.



The second argument centres around performativity and professionalism. There is a lot of opposing evidence in this area. It is clear that a performative culture pervades much of the sector; however, the impact that the 'Twelve Dancing Princesses' has had on the psyche of the sector suggests that the radical, campaigning history of the sector has not been forgotten. As with performativity, professionalism can be seen in two ways (probably best summed up by the European Commission, 2013, research). Where the organisational culture fits within this research clearly significantly affects the role of the manager and how they are perceived by others. The concept of an imposed professionalism has been the subject of much criticism (Lingfield, 2012) and this has caused tensions with the performative culture.

Finally, support within the sector for the transition from lecturer to manager is also a significant area of research. This can significantly affect the construct of the self-identity of managers and hence is of great importance for a smooth transition to a postliminal state. Successive studies have suggested that support for the transition is lacking and that people taking the role do not feel fully prepared. Although there appears to be some work emerging on improving this area, it is still a concern. This is especially true given the fluid nature of self-identity that has been explored – most notably in relation to Goffman (1959) and Bauman (2000) – and this means that a lack of support can cause disorientation when managers are in a liminal state.

In addition to the literature, this chapter has identified two frameworks that will be at the heart of the research. This will provide a theoretical basis for looking at the research objectives. The first framework uses the work of Busher and Harris (1999) as a way of defining the role of middle managers. The second framework uses the idea of personal self-identity during transitions as well as how others perceive us, as discussed by Jenkins (2014). There are tensions between the two frameworks: Busher and Harris (1999) have taken a clear, practical approach whilst the other approach has strong theoretical roots. This means that it is important to balance the frameworks and recognise the tensions that exist between them

## **Chapter 3: The Methodological Approach – The Philosophical Argument**

### **Chapter 3.1 Introduction**

The next two chapters will investigate the research methodology used in this study and discuss the reasons for selecting the research tools chosen, as well as explaining why others were rejected.

The first methodology chapter (Chapter 3) discusses the philosophical approach to the research and explains why an interpretive approach has been used for the research. Qualitative and quantitative techniques will be explored, and the chapter will outline their relevance to this research as well as looking at my role within the research as someone who has close ties with the sector. The second chapter (Chapter 4) looks at the practical research methods used. This involves providing a rationale as to why both an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used. It will also critique any potential problems that might exist.

Ethical considerations will be discussed at the end of Chapter 4 and have been taken into account at the design stages of the research to ensure that methods employed are in keeping with BERA and University of Warwick guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.2 The philosophical approach to the research**

#### **3.2.1 Underpinning assumptions**

A key tenet underpinning the methodology of this research was that the narrow, performative-based definitions of terms that have been encouraged within the sector are not necessarily helpful when researching the role of the middle manager. Defining ‘success’, ‘failure’ and even issues such as ‘levels of support’ and ‘training’ in quantitative terms (such as a rating scale) is likely to fail to bring out the human element that is of vital importance when discussing any transition in life. In addition, it is unhelpful to view a transition merely as being either a ‘success’ or ‘failure’

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter and the following one are written in a different style to the others as I would like it to explore my personal motivation for using the tools and approach that I did. The frequent use of ‘I’ and reference to my own personal opinion is a deliberate approach. It is also used to highlight the subjective nature of the choices made.

(George, 1993) and so any methodology used when investigating this needs to ensure that a more sophisticated and more personalised technique is used. Apart from the fact that any transition that occurs will be considerably more nuanced than that, a more performativity-based approach might well fail to explore and describe the human journey managers take when transferring to the role. Instead, it is likely to look at the end result and classify it as a success or failure, notwithstanding anything that occurs during the transition process.

A good analogy would be a comparison with the work of Schramm (1955), who looked at the process of getting from one point of understanding to another. He talked about the way in which a journey can be measured in two different ways. Firstly, a journey can be measured by identifying whether a goal has been reached - a binary measure which does not consider how the goal was achieved. Secondly, a goal can be considered to be met when the receiver changes their attitude, due to the process, which has a subsequent impact on future decisions and journeys; in effect, it has a long-term effect on behaviour rather than something which could be viewed as short-term. Hence, when looking at deeper changes in behaviour, the second approach can be used, that of examining the process that has been undertaken. This also considers what Schramm (1955) calls 'noise' in reference to the outside elements that affect the communication of a message and influences attitudes as well as outcomes. From a transition point of view, this might well refer to the support and guidance offered during the process or, alternatively, how participants navigate their way through any change of role. Examining the process as well as the end result is important as although the end goal might be achieved, if the process that gets the new manager to that point is a negative experience, this is likely to influence their attitudes and approaches once in position. Hence, the methodological approach must reflect this; any research methods used need to take into account both the possibility that 'noise' could affect any answers given but also how the transition is managed and what impact that would have on the new manager.

So, to ensure that the complexities of the sector are recognised, the approach used explored the intricacies of the role and also avoided the tendency to generalise this heterogeneous group. It also avoided mirroring

the mistakes associated with the performative culture prevalent in much of the sector, which tends to view the success of colleges in merely quantitative terms (Ball, 2003; O’Leary, 2014). Hence, the research tools used focus on the experience and processes of transformation and do not merely aim to classify the experience.

### **3.2.2 Interpretivist and positivist paradigms as an approach to research**

This research takes an interpretivist approach as it is the most appropriate approach for answering my research questions. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) assert that any research process contains three major dimensions – namely, ontological, epistemological and methodological – and that the interrelationship between the three needs to be coherent. This is the goal of this part of the chapter.

Within education, much of the research conducted has its roots in social science and this provides the context in which to understand the methodology. The notion of paradigms, in its modern usage, can be traced back to Kuhn (1962), who took the word from the Greek ‘paradeigma’. The translation of this is ‘example’ or ‘exemplar’ (Gokturk, 2005), although it is now more commonly used as a conceptualisation or a view of the world that allows us to attempt to understand the world and the research completed (Kuhn, 2012; Atkinson, 2013).

Much of the literature divides approaches into neat categories (or paradigms) to describe the approach (May, 2011). Hence, researchers often select either a strictly positivist or interpretivist paradigm, much as I have done in this research. There are arguments against this approach, however. Hammersley (2012a) suggests that the traditional boundaries between paradigms may be viewed as artificial, and strict compliance to one or other of the paradigms can lead to an overly simplistic approach that fails to encapsulate the complexities that exist within many research projects. This fact is acknowledged by Guba and Lincoln (1994) when they discuss the idea of subsections within the two established paradigms. Given the diverse nature of the middle manager within the sector, the research should not fall into the trap of excluding one research method or

being part of what Kelle (2006) calls ‘paradigm wars’. However, the research should be grounded in a philosophical base (Atkinson, 2013) and this is what the objective is when using an interpretivist approach.

Traditionally, there has been an affinity between the paradigm chosen and the practical methods used (Morgan, 2014). Interpretivist practices may be seen alongside qualitative data collection; positivist approaches could be seen to side with quantitative data collection. However, in recent years, the ‘rediscovery’ of pragmatism identified by Feilzer (2009) has meant that researchers can argue that they are able to select the right tools rather than those that fit in to the frameworks proposed by the traditional paradigms (Feilzer, 2009). This approach, usually dubbed ‘mixed methods’ (Hammersley, 2012a) has led to the legitimisation of pragmatism as a paradigm in its own right (Hall, 2013). Selecting this approach acknowledges the acceptance of the right of the researcher to select a model of research (Morgan, 2007) rather than having to select a side in the paradigm war (Hall, 2013).

The use of mixed methods research tools can have great benefits. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest that using the methodological pluralist approach that mixed methods research embraces can provide a much better result than if only one approach is used. Elsewhere, Bryman, Becker and Sempik (2008) argue that a mixed methods approach can lead to a deeper understanding of the topic. Despite these advantages, the pragmatic nature of mixed methods research does lead to some problems. If not grounded in a clear philosophy, the use of mixed methods can appear to be a random collection of tools (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By ensuring that I take an interpretivist approach to the research, I have identified a clear position that informs the research, and the mixed methods research tools used can fit into this position.

### **3.2.3 Relevance to this research – an interpretivist viewpoint**

An interpretive approach frames this research. The belief that reality consists of people’s subjective experiences of the external world (Hammersley, 2012b) matches my philosophy, and this creates an ontological belief that reality is socially constructed through experiences

and interactions with others. When tracing the roots of interpretivism back to Max Weber, we can see that humans are attempting to make sense of their worlds. In so doing, they 'continuously interpret, create, give meaning, define, justify and rationalise daily actions' (Babbie and Mouton, 2008:28). This research is grounded in the belief that people frame their experiences through their own perceptions, their own self-identity and their own sense of reality. Each individual has their own 'meaning making', and this sense of reality differs from person to person (Becker, 1998). It will be influenced by factors such as their own context (both at work and, in a wider sense, in life) as well as their own previous experiences and their own expectations. Hence, reality becomes a collection of subjective interpretations of events and the environment. These interpretations occur at two levels: firstly, at an individual level, so each person's interactions with others creates their own reality; secondly, at a group level, whereby the social interactions between a group of people help them create a reality that is shared amongst the people who constitute the group.

This approach means that the answers given by respondents were not judged as 'correct' or 'incorrect' (Walsham, 1995), and this is backed up by Gephart (1999), who argued that meaning is derived from individual interpretation. At its extreme, this suggests that there is no objective knowledge, as everything is subject to interpretation (Gephart, 1999), hence, when using information from interviews, it is important that I use the subject's own words as that is their view and, as such, is valid.

The belief that individuals interpret things differently explains how one event can be seen in a variety of different ways. As there will be differing interpretations, it was important that I did not generalise between people's experiences, interpretations and feelings. This reinforced the importance of looking at the individual perceptions of people experiencing the potentially stressful move from lecturer to manager.

Some of the 'noise' that Schramm (1955) talked about might refer to the various demographic elements that make up a sample, so factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, class and previous experiences need to be taken into account. Atkinson and Delamont (2009) give clear examples of how gender can affect approaches to research and needs to be taken into

account when deciding on research tools, and whilst the factors listed do not constitute an exhaustive list of things that might influence core values, they do help to highlight the heterogeneous nature of participants within the research.

This research, as with any, is shaped by both the perceptions of the participants, and also the values and aims of the researcher (Gephart, 1999). I have discussed my own values and experiences in Chapter 1 and expand on this further in the 'Insider research' section (3.6), but using this approach means that I also need to take into account the perceptions of respondents when analysing the answers collected. Fouché and Schurink (2011) argue that a different methodology is required to reach an interpretive understanding and that this meaning can only be discovered through language, whilst others argue that it is not possible to achieve this through exclusively quantitative analysis (Schwandt, 2007). This helped me select the use of semi-structured interviews for the majority of the research.

Summarising this brief discussion on the interpretivist paradigm, the three basic principles of interpretivism are as follows:

- The social world is constructed and given meaning subjectively by people, both individually and collectively. Human beings are subjects that have consciousness, or a mind, while human behaviour is affected by knowledge of the social world, which exists only in relation to human beings.
- The researcher is part of what is observed so it is important that I recognise my position and how that might be part of the 'noise' when respondents are giving answers to questions and hence how this might influence the answers of those taking part.
- Research is driven by interests and so by framing the questions in the way I have, I introduce an element of my own bias and perspective from the start. This should not necessarily be seen as a negative but it should be acknowledged and is discussed in more detail in the next chapter (Wisker, 2008; Blumberg, Cooper and Schlinder, 2008).

Applying this to my work, I tried to ensure that the research tools used reflected this philosophy, with the choice of semi-structured interviews allowing participants to explore their perspective of the world. In addition, I acknowledged my own position within the research (explored in more depth in Chapter 1 and also in section 3.5, ‘Insider research’). Table 1 provides a summary regarding the application to this thesis.

*Table 1: Summary of Methodological Approach (adapted from Cantrell, 2001)*

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Application</b>
Purpose of the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To critically evaluate the challenges lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to their managerial role.</li> </ul>
Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There are multiple realities and none should be viewed as ‘correct’.</li> <li>- Reality is socially constructed and will change. It is the shared cultures we inhabit. It is both individual and collective.</li> <li>- People make sense of their worlds by means of conversations with participants but also with those around them.</li> </ul>
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Events are understood through the process of interpretation, and reality has been understood through human interactions.</li> <li>- My relationship with the sector, and also the respondents, helps to construct knowledge.</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A broadly interpretive approach has been used. This utilised a range of methods to uncover shared meanings.</li> </ul>
Methods used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A mixed methods approach was used.</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews were conducted.</li> <li>- An online questionnaire was carried out.</li> </ul>



I have used an interpretivist approach within this research and I have also ensured that the rather more nuanced view of the paradigm that Burrell and Morgan (1979) propose is taken into account. They argue that there is not a single interpretivist paradigm and in fact the word 'interpretive' covers a whole family of diverse approaches that range from a 'hard' view of the paradigm that takes a very strict view of interpretivism to a softer approach that suggests that elements of a positivist approach overlap with the interpretivist paradigm. This means that a more pragmatic approach to the selection of research tools can be used.

### **3.2.4 Adding an additional layer – the positivist approach**

Reeves and Hedberg (2003) stress the importance of putting analysis in context and this can create a 'softer' approach than strict interpretivism. They suggest that although participants put their own meaning onto reality and groups also create that reality, it is helpful to define the world in which these realities exist, thus an interpretive approach is used within a clearly defined world. In the context of this research, this refers to the post-compulsory education sector in which middle managers operate.

The lack of background information on the sector within the literature means that it is necessary to attempt to contextualise the environment and ensure that there is a sound knowledge of the size and diversity of further education in England. To facilitate that, the questionnaire employed some research methods more typical of the positivist paradigm and provided facts and figures to provide the context missing from much of the literature. At the ontological level, positivists assume that reality is objective (based on the ideas of Auguste Comte) and is measurable using tools independent from the researcher (May, 2011). This helps define the scale of the sector and ensures that the words of respondents are contextualised within the environment. This realism (or naïve realism according to Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) assumes that there is a true state of affairs and whilst this is not an approach that is used for the research, it is necessary to understand the size, diversity and purpose of the sector.

Walsham (1995) describes a positivist approach as one where scientific knowledge consists of facts and whilst this approach works well when

looking at the scale of the sector, it would not produce a nuanced description of the process of transition between lecturers and managers, as each transition is going to be an individual process. So the quantitative analysis ensures that the sample of interviewees can be described as representative of the sector but more analysis is needed regarding individual experiences.

The pure form of positivism could be placed at the extreme end of the continuum that exists between interpretivism and positivism (Henderson, 1990) but it does not represent every part of the positivist approach. As with interpretivism, a number of different families exist that are covered by the overarching term 'positivist' (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Prime amongst these is postpositivism (Phillips, 1990). The idea that complete accuracy is not possible to achieve and that you cannot have complete objectivity (Phillips, 1990) represents a softer position and one which contains elements of pragmatism (Feilzer, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest how this contextualised background can be described as probable rather than verified and accepted and in the context of research that will not contain a 100% sample, this 'probable' position is an accurate representation of what a researcher can hope to achieve.

Borrowing a research tool more commonly used by those favouring a positivist approach (namely an online questionnaire), I ensured that the scope of the sector was illustrated to the reader was through an online questionnaire. This was used for contextualising the sector and providing the objectivity, whilst the interviews provide the nuanced view of the role. Denzin and Lincoln describe the purpose of enquiry when assuming a postpositivist approach as 'explanation (von Wright, 1971), ultimately enabling the prediction and control of phenomena, whether physical or human' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:116). Whilst this might be true for the analysis of the sector, when attempting to understand the role of the middle manager, it is not an appropriate approach to take given my philosophical approach and also the importance of trying not to generalise a heterogeneous group.

### **3.3 Qualitative and quantitative research – an introduction**

In common with the argument outlined earlier, the traditional divide between qualitative and quantitative research is too simplistic (Crotty, 1998). Graue and Karabon (2013) talk about the interrelationship between the two forms, describing each as a different dialect. This indicates that there is a common core to both approaches, and they suggest that selecting one rather than the other can lead to a researcher excluding a useful method simply because it does not fit with their chosen approach.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) concur with this and talk about how qualitative research is grounded in both an interpretive and positivist tradition, and they warn against trying to categorise the two approaches too rigidly. They continue by talking of the researcher as being a ‘bricoleur’, or a ‘quilt maker’, whose job it is to weave in the disparate strands and to use the methods that work best for them. This eloquent description works well with the mixed methods approach in this research and conjures up an image that interweaves both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Indeed, Kezar (2004) suggested that as long as researchers know their epistemological approach and are able to defend it, a mixed methods approach is valid. The philosophical approach to this research is rooted in the idea that the best method has been used for each part, hence the quilt of research that I have designed contains both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

When using an interpretive approach, the human perception element is vital, so a qualitative approach was used as there was no single truth for middle managers (Newby, 2010). An inductive rather than deductive method of enquiry was used and the interview-based approach ensured that the research could be personalised where necessary to the individual subject.

There are potential disadvantages to using qualitative research. It is difficult to frame the research without adequate knowledge of the sector as, especially with a semi-structured approach to interviewing, questions are generally themed and hence some knowledge of the key areas to explore is a prerequisite. Thus, a secure knowledge of the scope and complexity of the environment should be in place at the start (Newby, 2010). The LSIS (2013) and ETF (2016) surveys of the post-compulsory

education sector are useful in terms of quantifying the overall scope but they lack detail and are becoming somewhat dated. In addition, their coverage of middle managers is minimal. This creates a degree of messiness when trying to understand the scope of the environment, and this project has tried to address this by ensuring that as many middle managers as possible took part in the research. The use of a quantitative approach for the questionnaire also helped this. Quantitative data can help researchers 'eliminate biases, remain emotionally detached and uninvolved with the objects of study and test or empirically justify their stated hypotheses' (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004:14). The key word here is 'help': merely using quantitative data will not prevent any biases but it can help, along with other factors, to understand the biases that exist. This is especially true given my background in the sector; there is an inevitability that I will approach the research with my previous experiences influencing my views of the research.

### **3.4 How bias impacts on the research**

Bias within research may be defined as 'any tendency which prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question' (Pannucci and Wilkins, 2010:619) and is often used to describe a practice that encourages the participants to select one outcome rather than another (May, 2011). Whilst reducing bias might seem as though it might be beneficial to the research, the elimination of all biases can be viewed as both undesirable and not possible. Hodkinson (2006), whilst writing about researching youth subcultures, describes the benefits of being part of the culture and how that positioning can add depth to any research. He surmised that the knowledge gained whilst being an 'insider' outweighs any negatives (Hodkinson, 2006). This is the position I find myself in: I have knowledge of the sector due to my previous work experience, and those within the sector know me; however, this should not be seen in purely negative terms. The concept of insider research is discussed more fully in section 4.6 but, in brief, although my position suggests some bias, taking Hodkinson's (2006) argument, it also means that I can understand the responses more than if I was an outsider. Furthermore, the interpretivist approach, arguing as it does that there are multiple versions of reality,

suggests that each person's viewpoint is a valid one and hence multiple realities are possible.

Although many differing forms of bias have been identified, there are two that are particularly relevant for this research. Bias by misrepresentation (Mullane and Williams, 2013) occurs when research is presented incorrectly, with an enhanced focus on one element at the expense of others (May, 2011). By using the words of participants, this can be minimised and the reader will be able to draw their own conclusions based on these words. Secondly, bias by design (Mullane and Williams, 2013) contends that research methods should accurately reflect the population when quantitative methods are used. This generally refers to the sampling framework used and the questions that are asked (May, 2011) and, as such, helps to ensure that the sample matches the general specifications (and results) of the population. Whilst this does not ensure that final results would mirror those of the population, the principle of regression to the mean helps to explain how the results of larger samples often closely match the population (Morris, 2000). The use of triangulation is also vital when ensuring that the research accurately reflects the population. This is explored more fully in the next chapter.

Within qualitative research, bias is a more nebulous concept and one that should not necessarily be viewed in a negative light. Whilst some researchers ground their views in the belief that bias should be removed by ensuring that any research is replicable (Plummer, 2001), others argue that the argument is more complicated than that. Merrill and West (2009) discuss how, in biographical research, everyone's stories have validity and this means that trying to eliminate bias can actually impact on the responses given, as the worry is that you might be seen to be leading interviewees. Hence, whilst some attempts to eliminate bias (such as not asking leading questions, not offering incentives to participate) would appear to be sensible, it is not the case that every possible bias has been removed. The biases that are inherent in my background need to be articulated and acknowledged and it must be understood that this can add depth to the work (Hodkinson, 2006). An additional point is that the environment of the participants and the position of the researcher (as

discussed in section 3.6, 'Insider research') will influence what is said but that should not always be viewed in a negative light.

### **3.5 Evaluating reliability, representation and validity**

Throughout the research, a key consideration was to ensure that the work could be viewed as reliable, representative and valid. Given the limitations of the sample selected, it is impossible to be completely confident that those who were selected (or those who self-selected to complete the questionnaire) are entirely representative of the sector. However, by ensuring that the sample size was large, and mirrored the demographic profile of the sector, these risks were reduced.

Strathern et al. (1987) express this attempt to ensure that the sample selected is a fair one as an attempt to create 'persuasive fiction'; in other words, the reader is convinced of the veracity of what has been produced. This view is supported by Foucault (1979): 'I am fully aware that I have never written anything other than fictions. For all that, I would not want to say that they were outside the truth' (cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:204). So, when looking at reliability, representativeness and validity, the key aspect is to ensure that as much was done to ensure that it can be viewed as relevant to the research, whilst also acknowledging areas of concern.

#### **3.5.1 Enhancing the reliability of the research**

Hammersley (1978) describes how the problems of measurement within research can often be addressed by ensuring the validity and reliability of the approaches used. Reliability, defined as 'the agreement between two efforts to measure the same trait through maximally similar methods' (Campbell and Fiske, 1959:277), is especially important when dealing with a diverse collection of qualitative sources, such as those used in this research. Moving to Joppe's definition, the challenges associated with ensuring that any qualitative approach remains reliable become clear: 'the extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study...and if the results if a

study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable' (Joppe, 2000:1). From this, we can identify two initial problems for this study: firstly, the fact that there is not universal agreement on what is meant by reliability, and secondly, the difficulty in applying reliability to research using a mixed methods approach.

Turning to the first problem, that of an agreed definition, Robson (2011) stresses that replicability is the key to reliability, a view shared by van Exel and de Graaf (2005). Golafshani (2003) extends this and suggests that reliability can be likened to stability, in that when retests occur, there should be a similar result. May (2011) concurs with this view and stresses the importance of piloting any instrument to ensure that reliability is tested at an early stage. Hence, when discussing reliability in this work, it is the replicability that we are most interested in.

Whilst reliability is most easily defined in quantitative data (Golafshani, 2003), Burton, Brundett and Jones (2008) posit that complete reliability is difficult, if not impossible, to fulfil for qualitative researchers. Leung (2015) suggests that as qualitative data deals with non-specific variables, there will be emotional and error biases which are likely not to be present with quantitative data. Golafshani (2003) concurs and suggests that when looking at reliability in qualitative research, whilst it is important to recognise inconsistencies, these should not always be seen in negative terms as sometimes they can be used to identify biases that help explain factors being studied.

In addition to this, taking a reflexive approach allowed me to reflect on the reliability of the research. I kept a reflective journal and this meant that I was encouraged to look at each stage and this, combined with the feedback from the pilot study, helped to increase the reliability of the research. One area that a reflexive approach was used in was when triangulating findings I was able to look at any inconsistencies and understand whether this was linked to the research tools, and if this was the case, it allowed me to refine them to encourage greater reliability.

The research tools used in this thesis were analysed to ensure that they were as reliable as possible. Before they were launched, an initial study was carried out. This consisted of representatives from colleges being

interviewed and completing the online questionnaire. This enabled me to check the reliability of the instruments and correct any errors that might mean that there were inconsistencies within the final results. Whilst this does not guarantee complete reliability, it does mean that any obvious errors can be corrected. A couple of potential problems were identified when looking at the reliability of the sample: firstly, participant error or bias, and secondly, research error or bias (Fox, Martin and Green, 2007). The latter has been largely addressed in the 'Insider research' section (4.6) but it is worth looking at the former in more detail here.

One of the objectives when looking at increasing the reliability of a questionnaire is to ensure that statistical variations are minimised and the sample is likely to be replicable, and hence might be viewed as having greater reliability (Curwin and Slater, 2002). Ensuring that the questionnaire was distributed by national organisations gave me the best possible chance of the results being more reliable. However, it was more difficult to ensure the greater reliability of the interviews as these can be affected by a variety of issues that we have termed 'noise' (Schramm, 1955). Klenke (2008) talks about the way in which 'dependability' should be used rather than 'reliability' when looking at qualitative data, and this was the guiding principle for the interviews. Dependability can be a construct of the number and type of people interviewed (Funder et al., 2014) and this was taken into account when selecting the sample size and demographic makeup. Conditions for the interviews were replicated as much as possible at each college and the interview took place away from the office of the participant. This meant that outside factors (such as phone calls, emails, frames of reference associated with an interviewee's office) were minimised. Funder et al. (2014) also encouraged transparency of data reporting, which helped to ensure that any inaccuracies could be corrected. By making transcripts available to participants, I was able to improve the accuracy of the information and hence present a set of interviews that were as dependable as possible.

Finally, the reliability of the analysis was examined to ensure that any inconsistencies were highlighted. Using triangulation between the literature, questionnaires and interviews helped me see whether responses were repeated in each of the three things looked at. In addition, it helped



me identify whether there were any outlying answers that needed to be further investigated.

### **3.5.2 Enhancing the representativeness of the sample**

Morris (2000) defines a representative sample as one that provides a subset of a statistical population that accurately reflects the members of the entire population. There are currently 335 colleges represented by the AoC (2014), of which 216 fall into the 'general FE' category, 93 into 'sixth form', 14 into 'land-based', and the rest specialise in one particular area of the curriculum (for example, Performing Arts). By distributing the questionnaire via the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), I aimed to ensure the widest possible response to the research, a factor which improves reliability (Newby, 2010). The fact that it came from a credible source also helped to improve response rates. In addition, the questionnaire contained questions which enabled identification of any areas of the sector that were underrepresented. This helped to make sure that my sample was representative of the diverse parts of the sector. The interviews were also organised to ensure that the views of managers in all parts of the sector were represented.

The assumption that if it comes from a credible source, it will automatically be completed should not be fully accepted without some analysis. There is a counterargument that suggests that if a questionnaire comes from a representative body, then it might be viewed with suspicion. This is particularly true in the current industrial relations climate, where the leading union in the sector (the University and College Union – UCU) had voted for strike action shortly before the questionnaire was distributed. Including checks on demographics and locations helped identify any potential structural bias and helped to build up a sample that is as reliable as possible.

Distortion can occur when the sample of respondents to the questionnaire does not match the characteristics of the population (Morris, 2000). An example of that might be an overrepresentation of one group (say, male managers from general FE colleges). To ensure that this was not the case, I

carried out an initial analysis of the responses and made comparisons to the most recent survey (ETF, 2016). This check showed that 252 responses were received by 31st January 2016 and the demographics were broadly in line with those of the sector (a full analysis is included in the next chapter). Despite this, a number of underrepresented groups were identified and so a targeted release of the questionnaire took place in February 2016. This was to ensure that land-based colleges and general FE colleges were better represented.

A similar approach was used with the interviews, where the initial selection of middle managers showed an underrepresentation of male managers. This was addressed by the use of a further, purposive sample, as it was important to ensure that the gender representation of the sample matched that of the sector as a whole. If it did not, then it would be possible that the viewpoints of specific groups of people would be neglected. Although the interpretivist approach used accepts that each individual's contribution is valued (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006), it is important that a wide cross-section of people are represented to help the researcher gain a picture of the sector across all its diversity. Failure to do so would mean that any external scrutiny would focus on any omissions and it would also mean that, potentially, the research would fail to reflect all experiences of middle managers.

### **3.5.3 Enhancing the validity of the research**

Hammersley (1987) asserts that validity refers to the degree to which an instrument measures what it says it measures, and clearly this is also very important when designing any research. As with reliability, there is a degree of divergency over exact definitions, in particular over the differing approaches taken by quantitative and qualitative research (Hammersley, 1987), but for the purposes of this research, the Hammersley definition will be used as a starting point. Golafshani (2003) identifies the problem of translating the idea of measuring what it says it measures to a qualitative approach, as the original definitions of the concept lay in an empirical, quantitative approach (Golafshani, 2003; Winter, 2000). Klenke (2008) also discusses how validity is rooted in a quantitative

tradition where benchmarks and statistical significance tests may be used to measure these concepts.

Within qualitative research, a differing approach may be used (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Indeed, even using the word 'validity' might be seen to be applying a positivist rationale to interpretive research, as the implication is that these words are associated with a statistical approach. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that 'credibility' should be used instead of 'validity', whilst Bassey (1999) suggests 'trustworthiness' as an alternative. Other writers have suggested that 'quality' or 'rigour' are more appropriate words (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Davies and Dodd, 2002). Whilst it can be argued that this is an argument over semantics (Golafshani, 2003), collectively what appears to be key is the ability to have confidence in the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Having confidence in the findings can often be linked to the ability of any research to be corroborated or confirmed by another study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), and both Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Bassey (1999) suggest the use of an audit trail of raw data, analysis, synthesis and notes (both process and personal) that confirm the research. Within qualitative research, the important points to note are the depth of the findings, the richness of what has been found, and the truthfulness and the detail contained within the interviews. To help this process, as many factors as possible (location, interruptions etc.) were replicated throughout all the interviews.

Maintaining validity is often seen as a problem in 'real-world' research and in particular in education, where environmental and structural factors change regularly (Robson, 2011). To help ensure that the research was valid, a number of steps were taken to link the tools to the original objectives (May, 2011). Firstly, the initial survey tested the research tools to confirm that the information collected would be useful and relevant for the final research. It also meant that any omissions and errors could be identified and corrected before the main study started. Finally, it helped to guarantee that a valid target audience could be identified (Briggs and Coleman, 2007).

Secondly, the design of the questionnaire was checked by six colleagues (three of whom had worked within the sector), who were asked to identify

any problems and make suggestions for its improvement. This researcher triangulation helped to ensure that not only was the wording correct but also any subconscious bias I might have had when writing the questions could be addressed at this stage.

A number of changes were made to the questionnaire after these two steps. Three omissions were corrected (namely, one region had been missed out from question 3, a question relating to the type of organisation had not been asked and a 'prefer not to say' option was added to all appropriate questions). As well as this, a number of questions were modified to ensure that more narrative-based answers were possible.

Finally, the method of collection for the questionnaires was modified, with Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) being used for the final questionnaire. The BOS survey was selected after trialling a number of alternatives. It had the advantage that it could tabulate and perform statistical analysis on the final set of data, which helped with the final analysis. In addition to this, it had a number of security features that ensured that information was kept safe and secure during and after the collection period.

These measures ensured that validity, and indeed credibility and trustworthiness, was maintained.

### **3.6 Insider research**

The next philosophical argument to explore refers to the concept of insider research. The definition of insider research – research that is conducted within a social group, organisation or culture of which the researcher is also a member (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) – suggests that when looked at initially, the proposed research could fall into this category. Whilst this does not necessitate significant changes to the approach used, my positionality as a researcher does need to be examined. Merton (1972) suggests that the insider has intimate knowledge of the community and its members. Whilst this can have advantages in terms of understanding the context and empathising with participants, it does mean that the researcher might find it difficult to stand back and ensure objectivity is maintained (Burgess, 1984). Reversing this relationship, it also means that I will be known by many participants and this means that the answers

given are likely to be influenced by that knowledge. This previous immersion in the culture means that my research is ‘inevitably shaped by existing assumptions, relations, prejudices, values and experiences’ (Curtis, Murphy and Shields, 2014:87). Whilst this should not be viewed in a negative context, it does need to be acknowledged and responded to. The FE culture described by Huddleston and Unwin (2007) does tend to be perceived as impenetrable to outsiders of the sector and the fact that I worked in the sector for many years suggests that there will be a higher degree of acceptance of me than of some researchers. However, unlike researchers such as Spenceley, Petrie and Iredale, I have now left the sector and hence might be viewed as too remote from the current realities. This represents a difficult balancing act and one that needs to be addressed. It is important that I recognise the limitations to my knowledge and do not assume that I know the sector, as it is likely that some of my knowledge has now become dated.

Section 1.4 outlines my previous experiences within the sector in some detail but, in short, the fact that my experience of middle management was in an organisation that took a highly performative approach to the role and that did not provide support (other than in systems) is something which needs to be acknowledged. Whilst my philosophical position would suggest that each person’s experiences should be valued, there are a number of steps that can be put in place to ensure that I do not merely replicate my own experience (albeit unintentionally). Interviewing middle managers from a range of colleges helps this process, as does using purposive sampling of managers within colleges that are known for having differing cultures.

The links between insider research and an ethnographic approach are well established and this research shares many of the benefits (and problems) of ‘practitioner ethnography’ or ‘teachers as researchers’, as discussed by Stenhouse (1981) For instance, I have a good knowledge of the terminology and numerous acronyms of the sector; however, I also have preconceived ideas about the use of many of the systems. The performative culture I was immersed in for the majority of my time in the post-compulsory education sector ensures that this familiarity with the cultural setting and with the inculcated knowledge within the sector

described by Ball (2003) can help inform the research and I will have to spend less time understanding the sector. In short, I can identify the shared rules and assumptions of the 'community of practice' studied (Drake and Heath, 2008). However, my position as regards this research is rather more complex than it would be if I was coming straight out of the sector. Having not managed within the further education sector for 8 years, I would be viewed as 'coming out' of my previous insider position. Hence, although at first glance I would be an observing participant (Brannick and Coughlan, 2007), the distance between my previous post and the writing of this research suggests otherwise. This issue has been discussed in more detail in Chapter 1 but it is important to note how my knowledge of the implicit knowledge of the sector, and also the 'custom and practice' knowledge that outsiders are not likely to grasp, can be seen as a positive but the limitations must be recognised. This has been done by using the words of participants wherever possible.

Expanding on this idea, it is perhaps overly simplistic to talk about 'insider research' as a homogeneous concept; indeed, Hellawell (2006) talks of a continuum within the ethnographic field that arcs between 'complete observer' and 'complete participant'. When viewing this concept, it is clear that my position when I was managing within the further education section veered towards the participant end of the continuum but now my position is rather more subtle than that. Having left the sector 9 years ago, not all participants had worked alongside me and this meant that my position on the continuum changed as I moved from one person to the next (Henderson, 2010), hence my trajectory is towards the observing end of the arc. It should also be noted that the sector itself is in the process of rapid change so my previous experiences fell into a different era. This changing position was addressed via the approach advocated by Guba (1981). Triangulation of results, prolonged engagement (completed through the semi-structured interviews) and debriefing with supervisors were used as measures to ensure that the factors outlined were addressed in the research.

Linking to the idea of 'insider research' would be that of reflexivity within the research. This may be defined as how a 'researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of

investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions' (Malterud, 2001:483-484). It is clear that my previous background will influence the research, but as with the concept of bias discussed earlier, this should not necessarily be seen in a negative light. The fact that I have worked in the sector means that I have got preconceptions of the sector; however, 'Preconceptions are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them' (Malterud, 2001:484). By acknowledging these preconceptions and taking the ontological viewpoint that there are multiple realities, I can frame my experiences as one of the many realities, and it also helped me select semi-structured interviews as a research tool as that meant that the words of participants could be used.

Whilst Finlay (2002) describes reflexivity as a process involving muddy ambiguity, there are ways of encouraging reflexivity within research and these have been applied to this thesis. Firstly, the use of a reflective journal helped me think about my own position as a researcher and also make any changes needed as the research progressed. A typical entry was written following the third interview I conducted:

I found that difficult, Belinda was a good person to interview but she came into the sector after I left and I found myself shuddering at some of the things she said. She was very corporate, used Ofsted language constantly, was very focused on KPIs and she saw management as a series of tasks. I totally disagree with that viewpoint and had to stop myself contradicting her. Driving back it made me realise that the sector has changed (at least it had at that college) and that my view was not the only way of looking at the challenges faced by managers. I must make sure that I use her words rather than mine wherever possible and I must make sure that I send the transcripts to each person, just in case I have missed anything or put the wrong slant on anyone's words.

This approach, whilst it did not negate the impact my experiences had on my research, did allow me to reflect and take action in order to help ensure that any richness of information was captured.

Barry et al. (1999) assert that using multiple investigators can also help reflexivity within research. Whilst this was not possible within this research, ensuring that participants saw the transcripts of interviews and an open dialogue was kept with them through email meant that a reflexive approach could be taken and this could be used to frame conclusions. Whilst this did not avoid the muddy ambiguity that Finlay (2002) described, it did mean that my position could be acknowledged and that the complexities of the sector could be addressed.

### **3.7 Framing reality**

A final area to look at is how reality should be framed within my thesis. When carrying out research, there will always be a tension between the perceived reality of the participant on that particular day and wider issues which impact on their perception. Hence, when discussing a particular incident, a manager's view might be influenced by how they have interacted with an individual employee during the preceding time period. For example, a given disciplinary issue might be viewed as serious if the person concerned had been uncooperative or aggressive during that day, whilst it might be viewed as more minor if the person had been supportive, helpful and contrite during the period prior to this being discussed. In short, perception can change according to factors outside the interview and this needs to be considered when discussing this method of research. As Holliday (2007:91) highlights, any interview is 'already different from the social reality it is taken from'.

As I interviewed the managers, my hope was that they were physically and emotionally distant from their day-to-day job, thus allowing a more reflective experience to take place; however, the reality proved to be that many brought the 'baggage' of the day with them and this was likely to colour their thoughts.

As suggested by the metaphor of a series of voices (Holliday, 2007), the study by necessity involved interpretation which took into account the very personal nature of individual manager's perceptions. The 'first voice' could be described as the personal narrative of the participant, whilst the 'fifth voice' depicted the researcher pulling together different strands to produce



an overarching argument. Although this is a clear way of describing the process, perhaps a better approach would be to invoke the idea of the researcher producing an echo of the managers interviewed.

The participant in the interview described their experience. Already, the description included a selection of that experience; some things were left out, others added. This self-selecting approach varied between managers and varied according to the day the manager has experienced (as well as a number of other external and internal factors). Just like an echo, the description contained much of the original voice of the experience but with new tonal shades (Holliday, 2007). The participant highlighted things that had the most impact; they will have modified their account in response to the questions that I asked. By recording the interviews, I have attempted to remove another level of interference but my mere presence will have influenced the interview as I am likely to pick up on specific issues, and these are not always going to be the same ones that the participant would select. My analysis of the interview provides a further echo: I have focused on certain themes and the concern is that I will distort the sound through my analysis. Through these processes, I am not creating a new voice, but a voice that has shades of the original and shades of the new, just like echoes. It is therefore important to acknowledge the potential distortions that will have inevitably occurred during the research process. As highlighted earlier, my decision not to retell participants' interviews is an attempt to avoid further distortion through the introduction of my words instead of participants' words. Hence, where possible, managers' own words have been used, although inevitably a degree of interpretation will be necessary.

### **3.8 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the philosophical arguments that surround my choice of methodology. A key part of this research is my knowledge of the sector and my positioning within it. Although I could not be viewed as a pure 'insider', my experience and knowledge of post-compulsory education does influence my approach to the research.

Taking an interpretivist standpoint helps to ensure that I am not merely looking for one solution and one universal truth. By using participants' own words wherever possible and by acknowledging my position, I can help the reader understand the background. In some cases, my previous experiences can help the process. Hodgkinson (2006) might argue that this knowledge creates a deeper understanding of the words of the interviewees and hence creates a richer dialogue.

The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches can be justified as a way of ensuring that participants' words are framed within a secure knowledge of the sector and it ensures that all parts of a highly diverse sector can be recognised and investigated. It also means that the research does not fall into the trap of rejecting methods that would be useful merely to take sides in what Kelle (2006) called paradigm wars.

Finally, it is important to note that generalisation and representativity is expected to characterise the outcomes. Whilst the interpretivist approach means that everybody's approach has value, it is hoped that themes can be identified that will create broad generalisations. In addition, the careful selection of the sample will help to assist in the representativity of the research to the broad sector.



## **Chapter 4: The Methodological Approach – Research Methods, Choices, Approaches and Critique**

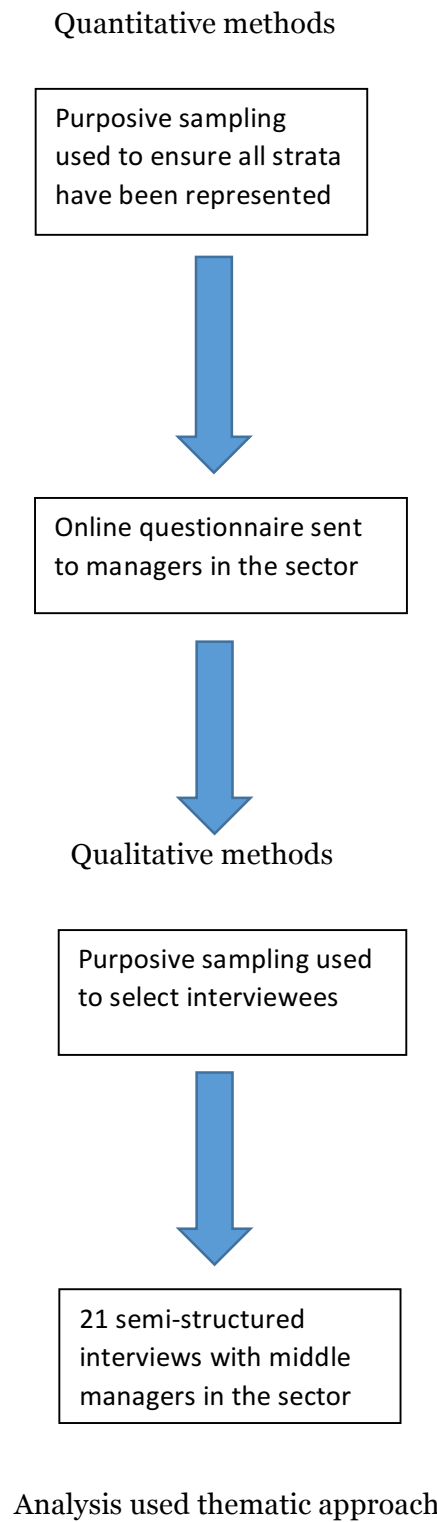
### **4.1 Introduction and a summary of the positioning of this research**

This chapter outlines and discusses the methods employed in this thesis. It covers the purposive sampling technique used as well as discussing alternative approaches to those selected. The challenges I faced, and how I overcame them, will be examined and this chapter will also include lots of detail about the process followed when collecting the research.

The research used two tools in order to explore the research objectives. Firstly, an online questionnaire was sent to all colleges, which elicited 302 responses, and subsequently 21 interviews were conducted with middle managers within the post-compulsory education sector. More details of the breakdown of responses can be found in the ‘Responses to the questionnaires’ section (4.3.6) and also in Appendix 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the broad approach taken to the methods used. Its aim is to show how the initial, interpretivist philosophy cascades down to the choice of research tools. The quantitative research is the starting point, with the results informing the qualitative research.

#### 4.2. The research methods used



*Figure 1: Overview of Methods*

### **4.3 Research tools – questionnaire**

#### **4.3.1 Initial pilot study**

To ensure that key themes were identified, aims were validated and research instruments were thoroughly tested, an initial study was put in place. By completing this pilot study, it was hoped that a number of areas would be identified that would ensure that the main study could be framed in order to ensure its relevancy and also to provide structure to an area that encompasses a wide range of potential issues. In short, it provided evidence of investigator responsiveness (Morse et al., 2002), which helped promote the validity and reliability of the main study, whilst also allowing me to further improve the proposed questionnaire and any research tools used. In addition, the initial questionnaire helped me gain more knowledge of the sector and helped frame the semi-structured interviews completed in the main study.

No research can be viewed as ‘neutral’; indeed, even stating that you are going to take an objective approach is viewed as a value position (May, 2011), so any potential biases were addressed at this initial stage, as discussed in the previous chapter. The phrasing of the questionnaires and interview questions helped to ensure there were no leading questions. For example, I made frequent use of the word ‘you’ when interviewing, to ensure that it was clear that what I was interested in was their opinions. Within this area, it was also important to address the concept of reflexivity and recognise that how we construct the world does affect the research (Fox, Martin and Green, 2007). As discussed in Chapter 3, given my background in the sector, it is highly likely that my experiences and transition process would help form the basis of my assumptions and conceptions of the role (and indeed the sector). The initial study and the framing of the questions were good ways of addressing this and identifying how this could be changed for the main study. Transcripts of the initial interviews were analysed to see how participants addressed the questions asked and also to see whether I was putting my own values and beliefs onto the answers given.

#### **4.3.2 The use of questionnaires in research**

The use of the questionnaire was designed to ensure that the diverse nature of the sector was represented within the final research (Jameson, 2006). Given the choice of semi-structured interviews as the second research tool, the questionnaire provided the opportunity to survey a large, geographically (and organisationally) diverse cohort without incurring the additional time and expense associated with having to meet middle managers face to face. This approach ensured that responses made in the interviews could be framed in the context of the answers given by a large sample of middle managers and it could also be used to identify patterns or trends. Because of this, it was important that the survey was completed prior to interviewing the middle managers; this made sure that not only could I ask for volunteers when sending out the questionnaire but also I could use the results as the starting point for my thematic analysis of the results.

Questionnaires represent a good way of accessing very large cohorts and are useful in gathering large amounts of information that can then be used for the analysis of the research objectives (Newby, 2010). Given the numbers and geographical spread of the participants, an electronic method of questioning guaranteed that as many people as possible could contribute to the research. In addition to this, using this method meant that I had the ability to structure the collection method in such a way that made it easily collatable (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008). This was particularly important given the diversity of the sector; a well-designed questionnaire helped ensure that any correlation could be easily identified.

Finally, Burton, Brundett and Jones (2008) identify the fact that questionnaires allow participants privacy, anonymity and space for reflection. I reinforced this by encouraging managers to send additional thoughts to me after completion if they wished to add anything after the event. Whilst this made statistical analysis of the information gathered more difficult, the purpose of the question and the interpretivist approach used meant that any loss in this area was more than compensated for by the benefits gained from the additional insight that participants gave me.

A number of other forms of survey were considered but then rejected. A postal survey would have meant that each organisation within the sector

could be targeted and, if an efficient method of returning the questionnaire was used, it could also help to increase the size of the sample. However, the cost and time implications meant that this was not a viable option. A further option was to use a purposive sampling technique to identify colleges to take part in the survey. I could then visit those organisations and the survey could be completed face to face. This would have had the advantage of me being able to check the veracity of answers and also allow any clarifications to be given. However, again, time and cost implications mean that this was not an option that could be used.

#### **4.3.3 Overcoming problems associated with questionnaires**

Whilst some writers view questionnaires as a useful tool in providing objective and quantifiable data (Curwin and Slater, 2002; Morris, 2000), there remain a number of concerns regarding their use in educational research. Robson (2011) argues against relying solely on questionnaires, whilst Tourangeau (2006) notes the possibility of an inbuilt bias which means that people preselect whether they answer the questionnaire or not. He argues that the people who respond tend to be those who have a specific point to prove, hence the answers overrepresent certain viewpoints. Whilst this problem cannot be fully resolved, it can be mitigated by the use of triangulation and it could also be argued that given the fact that the philosophical basis of this work is that there are multiple realities, the views of each person are valid.

The second concern Robson (2011) raises regards the problem created by using a tool that is subject to interpretation by the respondent. The wording of the questionnaire needs to be closely checked to ensure that no 'double meanings' are present, a situation that might lead to findings that are not reflective of the population as a whole, or in some cases the respondents themselves. In addition to this, the use of 'open questions', whilst useful in gaining a 'snapshot' of participants' views, can be open to misinterpretation and it is important to be aware of non-response bias (Robson, 2011). This is especially true for an online questionnaire, where it is not possible for respondents to check any ambiguities. It was therefore very important that the structure of the questionnaire was logical and the questions comprehensible, and that access to the questionnaire and the



instructions for its completion were as simple as possible. The wording of questions was based on the premise that the language used should be clear and unbiased. Care was taken to avoid leading questions or complex language, and all questions were kept short both in respect of the time taken to complete the questionnaire and to ensure that no single question involved any degree of complexity.

To help to address these problems, the questionnaire was piloted and modified in light of comments made. In addition, the themed approach used for the analysis and discussion meant that I was not solely reliant on the questionnaire when looking at the results of the research.

Other writers have identified other potential problems. Burton, Brundett and Jones (2008) suggest that for online questionnaires, response rates are sometimes low and they might differ between different segments of the population. To help mitigate this, the most recent survey of the sector (ETF, 2014) was used to ensure that there was a representative sample from each part of the post-compulsory education sector.

Participants' familiarity with questionnaires also means that they are seen as 'non-threatening' and that increases the completion rate, although there remains the risk that participants might have 'questionnaire fatigue' in that the sheer number that they have completed means that they are unwilling (or unable) to give their full attention to any subsequent questionnaire (Morris, 2000). This was reflected in some of the conversations I had with people being interviewed who (unprompted) mentioned the need to complete surveys about their roles. This undoubtedly would have an impact on the numbers responding but there is little that can be done to mitigate this problem. The fact that the questionnaire came from recognised and respected bodies meant that 'respondents have been approached professionally' (Punch, 2009:249).

Finally, Burton, Brundett and Jones (2008) suggest that you are unlikely to obtain detailed or profound information through the use of an online questionnaire. Whilst true, the addition of a semi-structured interview means that more detail can be obtained where necessary. The purpose of the questionnaire in this research is also not to obtain the depth of information that will be gained from the interviews; instead, it is used to look at the scope of the sector.

#### **4.3.4 Structuring the questionnaire**

The questionnaire was structured to ensure that each part had a specific focus, whether it be connected to mapping the scope of the sector or answering a specific research objective. Questions focused on general aspects of the job, roles and responsibilities and particularly the support and training given. This covered both the initial support and training offered but also the support and training given whilst completing the job. Questions regarding this area were broken down to see whether the help focused on support for specific tasks or whether there was the broader, more generic, management training strand that is often found within other sectors. Courses such as the Certificate in Management Studies (CMS) and the Diploma in Management Studies (DMS) are used extensively to provide a broad-based overview of the managerial paradigm for newcomers to middle management and the questionnaire investigated whether this is also the case within post-compulsory education. The questionnaires were also used to identify good practice within colleges in regards to support and training for transitions (a copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2).

When the questionnaires were completed, a number of statistical analysis techniques were used to analyse the answers given, including measures of location and dispersion. Information was coded and correlation was used to identify links between various answers. This helped to see whether there are any differences of experience that may be linked to demographic factors, geographical factors or experiential factors. In addition to this, graphing was used to visually represent results that were judged to be significant from the answers given. Measures of location and also measures of dispersion helped to identify how homogeneous the group surveyed were and also see whether there were any outliers within the answers that needed to be represented when presenting any findings (Newby, 2010).

The evidence collected by the questionnaire was particularly helpful when analysing the research objectives, which look at the role of the middle manager and also the support and training that they are offered, and lend themselves to a quantitative-based approach that fits in well with a questionnaire.

For the purpose of this research, the questionnaire was distributed to allow any level of manager in further education to respond. Although this research is primarily looking at middle managers, the views of others on the role of the middle managers remain valid and it was thought important to gain as wide a range of opinions as possible. Indeed, the views of senior managers on the role of the middle managers could provide an interesting confirmation (or otherwise) of the views expressed.

Questions were split into a number of categories that were chosen to align them to the initial objectives of the research, and they were also linked to the emerging findings from the literature review. This confirmed the relevance of the information and also made sure that the questionnaire was not overlong. The structuring was as follows.

The initial section of questions (coded 1 to 6) was linked to the scope of the sector and the respondent's role within the sector. These questions helped to ensure that a bigger picture of the role of middle managers within the sector was captured. In addition, it was used to ensure the sample of respondents was as representative as possible of the sector as a whole.

The next section of the questionnaire (questions 7 to 9) looked at the recruitment of managers. Jameson (2013) describes recruitment as being ad hoc and rather chaotic in nature, and these three questions looked at how managers were recruited to their current jobs. This helped to assess the findings of Jameson (2013) and linked to the first and fourth research objectives. The free text part was included so that any good practice could be identified which would help the transition that people make to being managers. This was a key theme identified in the initial study, with all but one of the managers interviewed describing a process that was informal and relied on a 'networking' approach rather than a structured recruitment process.

The final section (questions 10 to 19) was included in order to look at how the manager perceived their role, what they do on a day-to-day basis and the support and training that they are provided with. Returning to Busher and Harris (1999), this section was designed to see whether the four elements – 'bridging and brokering', 'a transformational dimension', 'supervisory management' and 'representative leadership' – are an adequate description of the manager within the sector, some years after

the original research was published. This also linked to the first, second and third objectives of this research.

A mixture of closed and open questions was used when designing this questionnaire. Closed questions were designed to mirror the categories used by the most recent ETF survey (ETF, 2016).

Open questions were reserved to capture information about specific issues managers wished to raise and also to illustrate answers given. This gave respondents the chance to answer questions ‘in their own voice’ (Newby, 2010:298), as well as providing an opportunity to highlight any specific incidents that had either a positive or negative effect on their development within the role.

The open, free writing questions required a different approach to analysis, a view endorsed by LeCompte and Preissle (1993:332) when they suggest that ‘the canons of reliability for quantitative research may simply be unworkable for qualitative research’. For these questions, a thematic approach was used to identify any commonalities between answers. This analysis was used to help support and check findings from the closed questions, as well as identifying particular areas of interest and also good practice.

#### **4.3.5 Sampling**

A purposive sampling approach was taken to the majority of the research. This approach, which is a non-probability-based approach that selects participants based on characteristics associated with the objectives of the research (Morris, 2000), was used to ensure that the sample matched the characteristics of the sector as a whole. The only deviation from purposive sampling was the initial selection of participants for the questionnaire. This was sent out to everyone and then purposive techniques were used to identify and address any underrepresented groups.

Whilst there are criticisms of purposive sampling, the advantages are that I was able to select participants who represented the disparate elements of further education. This ensured that one area did not dominate and the views of all parts were taken into account. Whilst it might be possible to

argue that there is an inbuilt bias to the use of this method (in effect, I am selecting respondents and it might be argued that this means that I am affecting the results), I would argue that the alternatives would also suffer from the same problems and by selecting people who had already volunteered to be part of the survey, I was able to ensure that my participants were willing participants.

The alternatives, namely stratified and random sampling, each had problems associated with them. A random sample would be difficult to manage given the geographical spread of the sector, whilst a stratified sample might not necessarily produce participants who are keen to be interviewed, which would not help the research. In addition, it would not be possible as there is no complete list of middle managers within the sector.

The method of distribution helped the research be representative of the sector, as did the checks that I put in place to ensure that the proportions of people matched those of the sector as a whole. As this was an online survey, the literature suggests that the response rate was likely to be around 10-15% (Nulty, 2008) although some rates were reported to be as low as 2% (Petchenik and Watermolen, 2011). Taking into account the latest figures for employees in the sector (ETF, 2016), this equated to a return of around 350 responses; the final total (302), whilst slightly lower, was a representative sample for the sector once demographic and location statistics were checked, and a further sample took place to correct any imbalances.

Breaking down the 302 rather more, 208 respondents were female, 68% of the total sampled. This is slightly higher than the figures obtained by the ETF (2016). To match the ETF figures, the total should have been 190. However, when taking into account statistical variations, this does fall into acceptable confidence limits and so can be viewed as representative. A similar pattern was repeated when ethnic origin was investigated, with 280 people answering 'white' when asked about their ethnic origin. National figures are difficult to find, with almost 1 in 5 employees failing to answer this question (ETF, 2014); however, when looking at the available information, this does seem to be broadly representative of the sector. All parts of the sector were represented, with general FE colleges being the

most popular answer regarding the place of work (181 responses); this was followed by sixth form colleges (57 responses) and agricultural colleges (27 people). This breakdown is very close to the proportions identified by the ETF.

#### **4.3.6 Responses to the questionnaires**

The questionnaires were sent out online between 5<sup>th</sup> January 2016 and 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016. As detailed in the previous chapter, they were distributed via a number of sources, in order to maximise participation rates and also to ensure that views from the entire sector were captured. A check was put on the questionnaire in order that people could not answer more than once.

252 responses were received by 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016 and the demographics were broadly in line with those of the sector. To ensure that all parts of the sector were represented, a further, targeted release of the questionnaire took place in February 2016. This was to ensure that land-based colleges and general FE colleges, which had been underrepresented in the initial survey, were better represented. By 29 February 2016, 302 responses had been gathered. 68% of respondents were female, whereas the ETF (2016 workforce survey suggests that females make up 63% of the workforce, although it should be noted that this refers to the overall picture and not just middle managers. Despite this, it does give a broad background to the sector in order for comparisons to be made. As with the national picture, the predominant ethnic origin was 'white' (nationally, the figure is 73%, with 19% not answering; within the questionnaire, the figure was 93%). In addition, the age profile was very similar, with one notable exception. The increase in younger workers that has been identified in recent reports (Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, UCET, 2015) was not shown in the questionnaires. Only 3.6% of respondents were under 30 – nationally, the figure for managers in the sector is over 10% (ETF, 2015) – which represents a significant difference.

When this anomaly is analysed further, it can be seen that although it does differ from the national picture, there are clear reasons for this. Firstly, the target audience were middle managers rather than all workers within the

sector. Cross-referencing this with the question about how long participants had been managers, we find that 65.2% of all respondents had been a manager for more than 5 years, suggesting that the absence of younger workers should not skew the final figures as the influx of workers in their twenties are likely to be working at levels below that of middle manager. Secondly, workers completing their Cert Ed or PGCE qualification were not included in this survey, but are included in the national survey. These students, in particular the in-service students, tend to be much younger than the sector average (UCET, 2015) and hence, nationally, the figure is likely to be higher.

One area of concern with the questionnaires is the breakdown of participants by type of organisation. Nationally, the most recent figures say that there are 186 general FE colleges out of the 266 organisations that were surveyed. The initial questionnaire responses indicate that this group was underrepresented, in particular in comparison to sixth form colleges. Land Based colleges were also underrepresented within the data. In order to correct this, the questionnaire was sent out to colleges that represented these categories directly and they were given 2 weeks to respond (from 15th February 2016 to 29th February 2016). This resulted in an extra 52 responses and ensured that the two groups that were initially underrepresented had sufficient numbers included in the final tally of data.

Although the questionnaire was sent to all managers within the sector (including senior managers), the vast majority of respondents did describe themselves as middle managers. Eleven people described themselves as 'other senior managers' whilst eight people did answer 'first line manager'. Given the limited numbers in the sample, it is difficult to draw too many conclusions from these categories but where they differed, this has been noted.

#### **4.4 Research tools – semi-structured interviews**

##### **4.4.1 Using semi-structured interviews in this research**

After completing the initial study, the final decision was to use a semi-structured interview.

Semi-structured interviews have the advantage of allowing the interviewer to be more focused on specific issues, and the interview can then be structured around the research objectives (Newby, 2010). Robson (2011) talks about a shopping list approach, whereby you can tick off the objectives in turn and then move on to the next area of interest. Whilst using this approach does provide the structure that might be lacking in less structured techniques such as biographical interviews, I wanted to be careful that I did not lose the richness of thought and information that was needed. To help ensure that this method met the needs of the research, I made sure that as well as interviewing the middle manager, I spent time with the rest of the department as well as any senior managers present, to ensure that the picture I built up during the interview could be validated by a process akin to triangulation. Although there is inevitably an element of subjectivity about information collected in this way, it did help to build up a more comprehensive picture and help validate the interviewee's words.

Research suggests that the transition process is an individual one, albeit one located within a social context, and this is something that needed to be fully explored. Due to the variety within the sector (Jameson, 2006), it is possible that participants might come from areas as diverse as local FE colleges, prison education, the armed forces and the NHS. Designing methodological tools that would suit these disparate groups was challenging but the advantage with a semi-structured approach is that a commonality of questions was maintained and this helped identify themes that run through the sector.

Ecclestone (2007) takes up this view that transitions are often very individual in nature; indeed, different parts of the same change (for example, a promotion to the middle manager position) have very different effects on different managers (Briggs, 2005a) and so the approach adopted was flexible enough to investigate these parts and to draw out reasons from each participant. Participants for the interviews were selected via the initial questionnaires, with managers who completed the questionnaires being given the option to be interviewed. This ensured that all contributors were committed to the research, hence ensuring that a deeper discussion could take place.



#### **4.4.2 Rationale for semi-structured interviews**

The biographical research approach, anchored in research by the Chicago School of Sociology since the 1920s and later by feminists (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), at first looked to be an ideal approach for this study, as it puts those researched at the centre of the research process and allows their voices to be heard. Indeed, this approach has a long history of being used when researching education (Merrill and West, 2009) and it is interesting to note that throughout its history it has been used extensively to research and track the experiences of groups who might be viewed as marginalised (Merrill and West, 2009). Although, when first looked at, middle managers might not necessarily be an obviously disadvantaged group, their role within the organisation does suggest that they could be viewed as marginalised.

The individual stories captured by the use of this technique can be a powerful counterpoint to the ‘accepted norms’ that pervade the sector. The compliance-based culture of the sector stresses the importance of conformity but the biographical research is able to go beyond this to look at the impact on individuals.

That is not to say that the approach does not have potential problems. Denzin (1970) talks about the danger of the subjects of interviews becoming lionised and the telling of the story merely stressing the heroic quality of their struggle. Whilst this might be true, the nature of biographical interviews means that it is their voice that is important and hence they need to be heard, whatever their view is of events. The participants’ experiences and words provide a glimpse into the participants’ reality that lies behind any theoretical discussion that takes place (an idea that Plummer, 2001, expands upon). That is not to say that the issue of social desirability should be avoided. Edwards (1957) suggests that respondents are likely to ignore things which are viewed as undesirable or indeed those that do not fit in with the narrative that they have constructed. This can be seen as a problem when researching specific questions, as this study is doing. His response to this was to say that it would help to construct a way in which you can attempt to filter this out. This process, used extensively in the marketing industry, means that indirect questions tend to be used to minimise the effect of social

desirability (Fisher, 1993). This approach helped with structuring interviews and suggests that rather than 'pure' biographical research, the approach taken in this study is classed as a 'semi-structured' interview approach. This enabled me to capture the views of the participants whilst also ensuring that the objectives of the research were kept in mind.

The semi-structured interviews helped to 'discern patterns but also distinctiveness in lives' (Merrill and West, 2009:2) and allowed the voices of participants to be heard. This narrative was used to inform the analysis and help shape the ideas within the work. There are many ways to collect narratives for analysis. For this research, the nature of the managerial role within post-compulsory education suggested that some methods were less appropriate. Given that a key focus is the transition participants make from their previous role to their current role, a structured interview process could be viewed as too restrictive and hence a broader approach was put in place to allow managers to talk about issues that they viewed as important rather than those imposed by an interviewer. In short, the voices of participants were put at the forefront of the research.

The use of written journals to document the day-to-day tasks and stresses of the job was considered; however, the lack of any 'downtime' in the working lives of managers would place time and personal pressures on all participants and was therefore rejected. Despite this, participants were encouraged to provide written reflections via email after the interviews had taken place, and some did. These reflections tended to be shortly after one of the interviews, possibly because the discussion at the interviews had prompted more reflection on a particular issue raised in the interview.

My own reflective journal helped to inform my feelings about the interviews and was also useful when I reflected on the manner in which participants answered questions. It was also helpful when exploring the backgrounds of participants. Talking to colleagues, line managers, students and others in the colleges visited, and reflecting on their thoughts, allowed me to build up a picture of the participants that helped validate much of what they said and also deepened, clarified and enriched my knowledge of the themes that were being discussed. Rather than merely interviewing the middle managers and then leaving, I tried to spend as much time as possible within the organisation in order to gain a

‘feel’ for the place and also to reflect on how the participant was viewed. This is reflected in the pen portraits that have been used in the analysis

The way an interview is constructed might be said to locate it on a line between unstructured and structured (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Denscombe, 1998). A more structured interview can be seen as almost like a ‘questionnaire administered face to face with a respondent’ (Denscombe, 1998:166), where the interviewer retains the power over the specific questions and the interview follows a linear process with few (if any) follow-up questions. This can help improve reliability, with the goal being that each participant has exactly the same experience of the interview. The diametric opposite to this is the unstructured interview, where the interviewer merely starts the theme and the focus is on the participants’ own thoughts and words, without much (if any) intervention by the interviewer.

Somewhere between these two approaches lies the semi-structured interview. This approach mixes interviewer interventions and the participant recounting freely and being allowed to move away from the themes set by the interviewer. In practice, many interviews will slide along the scale from semi-structured to unstructured. These two points on the line are different from the structured interview and are more appropriate for qualitative research:

Allowing interviewees to ‘speak their mind’ is a better way of discovering things about complex issues and, generally, semi-structured and unstructured interviews...lend themselves to in-depth investigations, particularly those which explore personal accounts of experiences and feelings.

(Denscombe, 1998:167)

For this study, which seeks to look at complex issues connected to transition, a semi-structured approach was used which was towards the unstructured end of the line. As mentioned above, a researcher, when conducting an interview, is working with a continuum. Certainly, where participants engaged in extended, uninterrupted discourse, there was an element of an unstructured interview in the exchanges. Likewise, at particular points during the discourse, where I may have asked for more specific detail, the interview became more structured.

#### **4.4.3 Overcoming the problems of semi-structured interviews**

Although it may physically look like a conversation, it would be naïve to think of an interview as a neutral event. A number of factors can impact on what a participant might say in an interview, thereby impacting on any information gathered.

The way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the way participants respond and give accounts of their experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In some cases, subconscious bias can alter the answer of a participant. A smile of approval can reassure a less confident participant and encourage them to answer using similar answers. In addition, follow-up questions could elicit new information which could alter the perspective of the interviewee (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

There are alternatives that could help solve these problems: unstructured interviews could be used to encourage freer, less interviewer-influenced expression, whilst a group interview could help limit the impact of any subconscious bias shown by the interviewer. However, both these techniques have their own drawbacks. An unstructured interview is likely to be more difficult to analyse and might stray from the purpose of the research, whilst group interviews are often difficult to organise but also can be influenced by groupthink (Janis, 1972).

Throughout the process, the interviewer, or the interviewee, may control the event by imposing their view of what should be said, either consciously or unintentionally. The time of day, the physical space in which the interview takes place and ongoing events for the two participants before the interview takes place may all impact on what is said and therefore what data is collected (May, 2011). It is not possible to divorce the information gathered through interview from the impact of these circumstances. What is possible, and what is completely congruent with a qualitative approach, is to acknowledge the context of the interview in the findings and be concerned about it in a way which may better correspond to a qualitative research method.

A further challenge of the interview is that a semi-structured interview on transition is likely to be an unfamiliar experience for most, if not all, of the

participants. Within the broader context, our knowledge of the features of the genre is likely to be gained from its more frequent occurrences; for example, from a job interview or a TV/radio interview. This means that I had to guide the interviewee through the interview, prompting where necessary (Curwin and Slater, 2002).

Expecting managers to engage in a completely unstructured interview forced them to engage in a very unfamiliar spoken genre and this may have interfered with the ability of the participants to respond. Although the unstructured or biographical approach can be a powerful tool (Alheit, 1995), the given time constraints in the sector meant that this might have been perceived to be putting extra pressure on participants, which could have reduced the number of people who were willing to be part of the research. For this reason, the interviews were undertaken with key themes in mind which could be used in order to 'kick-start the discussion' (Denscombe, 1998:178).

Despite some of these challenges, interviews have been widely used in studies within education, suggesting that they would be an effective tool in this study. Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) use a similar interview schedule to this study to investigate changes to teachers' pre-existing beliefs during a teacher education programme. In addition, Borg (2011) combines this approach with an analysis of course documentation. Both of these studies suggest that this approach was an effective tool in reaching their conclusions.

The interview itself consisted of open, in-depth questions that allowed participants to expand on any aspect that was of particular relevance to them. Plummer (2001) writes about the problems that can occur when interviews are too broad in scope, and hence questions were designed to have a focus with prompts from me taking place where necessary. A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 4.

A final problem identified by the literature (May, 2000) was the difficulty in a wide-ranging interview of identifying themes and looking for commonality between interviews that might cover different topics. To help mitigate this issue, once the interviews had taken place, I analysed the transcripts to identify key points that had emerged and also to show deviations where they occurred.

#### **4.4.4 Deciding on the questions**

The questions were framed after analysis of the questionnaires. This allowed me to ensure that emerging themes were explored in more depth and also meant that I could ensure that my research questions were covered in sufficient detail. A key consideration throughout the design of the questions was to ensure that the interviews were flexible enough to fully explore the research questions. This meant that the questions were put in place to provide a guide for the conversation without it being too structured.

Creating a safe environment can be problematic for interviewing (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008) and so I took care to ensure that participants were put at ease at the start of the interview. To do this, I started by asking participants a set of structured questions which could be described as 'safe'. These were about their current role, their duties, their remit and their current concerns. Starting with these 'easy' questions ensured that participants were able to relax and start the process without needing to probe too deeply into their memories. The first part of the interview schedule looked at demographic factors and this was cross-referenced against the ETF (2014) figures for the sector to ensure that sufficient coverage of all groups was present in the sample selected. It also allowed participants the opportunity to start with straightforward questions, a technique that tended to lead to more open answers later on in the interview (Morris, 2000).

The second set of questions focused on the demands of the job and the support given. These questions were important to ensure that a broad picture of the role of the middle manager was built up. The work used as a base for this research, that of Busher and Harris (1999), suggested that there were four main roles a middle manager performs; however, given the fact that their research was carried out shortly after incorporation, it was important to ascertain whether it was still valid. Another purpose behind this set of questions was to see what managers prioritised in their job. The varying importance given to each part could be gained by analysing how they answered these questions. Given that support for managers in the sector has often been viewed as a problem, asking about the training received (especially whether it related to specific processes or was more

generic) also helped to ensure that a picture of the role of the middle manager could be built up.

The final section looked at managers' views of the role and how they coped with the stresses of the job. This helped me to understand the transition that managers made and how they ensured that they were able to complete the job, despite any organisational (and other) problems that they might highlight.

Finally, all participants were given the opportunity to add anything to the interview as well as contribute more (via email) after the interview had taken place. This gave time for reflection or for managers to change their minds about their answers.

#### **4.4.5 Conduct and scope of the interview**

Twenty-one interviews were carried out through 2016. A full breakdown of who was interviewed can be found in Appendix 1 but, in short, 14 females and 6 males were interviewed, with all participants volunteering for the process through a process of purposive sampling. The sample was geographically spread, with 9 further education regions (as defined by the ETF, 2016) represented, and whilst the majority (18 out of 20) categorised themselves as having an ethnic origin of 'white', this does mirror the sector as a whole (ETF, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, although the average length of time I spent at each location was approximately 2 hours. During the time not classified as interviewing, I spent time talking to both senior managers and lecturers about their experiences in order to help contextualise what had been said in the interviews and also confirm what was said.

As well as the importance of creating a safe environment for interviewing (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008) it was also important to ensure that the interviewees gave open and truthful answers. To ensure that both a safe environment was maintained and also managers felt able to be open about their roles, I ensured that interviews took place away from their offices but still on the organisation's premises. This meant that we were less likely to be disturbed and managers reported that they felt more likely to be open about the problems with their roles when they were separated

from their teams. This rapport-building enabled me to ask follow-up questions without censure.

As is good practice with semi-structured interviews (Morris, 2000), I clarified any questions when asked to, and asked follow-up questions when answers were not given fully but, for the vast majority of the time, I let the participants take the lead. This ensured that the managers could decide on the priority of points when answering each question, a fact that helped me understand what they saw as important in each case.

My own actions could influence others during an interview so I ensured that, as much as possible, I maintained a neutral expression and position in the room. I also dressed in a similar way for each interview, wearing clothes which would be appropriate for working in the sector.

#### **4.4.6 After the interview**

As part of the research process, all interviewees were asked whether they would like a copy of the interview transcript (two, Odile and Allison, requested this) and they were also told that if any thoughts occurred to them after the interview was over, then they were free to email post-interview thoughts to me that could be included in the research.

The one manager who responded to this request was Odile, who emailed a week after the interview with a long response regarding relationships she had established within colleges:

Nothing very formal, just some things that went through my mind on different topics afterwards.

First of all, I noted that you asked me a lot about ‘processes’ that were in place to help me move into the role of manager / senior manager. I think when you used the word, I thought of some kind of induction programme with a series of events I would attend or a series of targeted meetings with ‘outcomes’ and lots of discussion about management skills, which probably I would have hated.

But I think there was a process in place. The fact that it wasn’t articulated or codified in any way didn’t mean it was there. It was a



kind of reified practice. In my first job, I mentioned my line manager, 'Diane', a lot. I think she had a set of processes in her mind when I started...what I would teach, what bits I would manage etc. I imagine that this was her idea of induction into the role. I don't think because it was individualised and in her head that it was less of a process. I never asked her about it, but she did induct several other people in my time there into other roles and I think she did the same thing.

It is interesting how her thoughts related to how she was asked about processes within her job. This perhaps reflects an inherent bias in the questions, one which is a reflection of previous experiences. It is also important to note that she suggested that processes do not have to be formalised, a point she clearly made later in her email:

I did a lot on reification and reified practice in my thesis – it's where I have the long extract from 'A Few Good Men' about the Code Red. I wondered if your interviewees, like me, might have been thinking of a set in stone programme when you mention processes.

The concept of reified knowledge is one that appears to be used extensively within the sector (Britzman, 1986). Knowledge is inculcated as managers progress within their careers, and the point Odile makes, that she was guided by Diane rather than following a formal process, is indicative of a process that worked well for her. Her comments also suggest that responses to this question from other managers would reflect an embedded understanding that processes tend to focus on processes rather than people.

Finally, as part of the post-interview checks, the findings section was sent to three interviewees who had expressed an interest in reading the final piece. Each was asked to comment on what they read and suggest any changes, any inconsistencies and any inaccuracies in the final piece. This proved to be beneficial. One statement of fact was corrected and all three interviewees suggested that it might be a good idea to write a little about my own experiences which might lead to potential biases. This has now been included.

#### **4.4.7 Responses to the semi-structured interviews**

Twenty-one interviews took place over the course of this research, with the demographical profile selected to ensure that it mirrored the national profile. 67% of interviewees were female (this is slightly higher than the national figure of 63%) and, in order to ensure that as many geographical regions were represented as possible, I travelled to colleges in the West Country, London, the East and West Midlands and the North of England to carry out the interviews. In most instances, only one person was interviewed per college but in four places, a couple of managers were interviewed. Specifically, Dennis and Beth worked within the same organisation, as did Stella and Judy, Samantha and Kerri-Anne and finally Allison and Angie (although Allison left shortly after the interview).

The interviewees had a wide range of managerial experience. One person was newly appointed to the role (they had been doing the job for approximately a month) and the most experienced manager had over 10 years of middle management experience. Everyone interviewed was over 30 and, interestingly, their age did not always correlate with the number of years that they had been doing the job. The majority (14 out of 21) worked in a general FE college whilst the remaining interviewees were based either in a sixth form college or a land-based college. Three interviewees (Allison, Jayne and Odile) had recently left the sector and reflected from their new roles, all three people were now working in the higher education sector.

As part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed for the research. This provided a rich source of evidence for the work and, once initial themes had been identified, purposive sampling was used in order to identify suitable interviewees. An example of this would be Odile, who was selected as it was known that she had been employed by three different colleges over a period of 5 years, in three different roles. These roles covered a number of different aspects of both middle management and senior management across a range of different colleges. This fitted in with the first theme identified by the initial research, which surrounded the recruitment of managers to the sector and how they were supported both before they started the job and once in position. Odile had been a successful lecturer and, through initial

conversations, it was clear that she was encouraged to ‘make the next step up’ by those managers who were surrounding her. Another manager (Allison) was very clear that her managerial style encompassed a transformative element; indeed, she spoke about it with an evangelical zeal that suggested that this was at the heart of her self-identity as a manager. This linked with one of the themes identified by Busher and Harris (1999) and she was interviewed in order to see whether the transformative theme was still a part of that manager’s role.

#### **4.5 Analysis of the research – thematic analysis**

When looking at the information gathered, the key approach used was a thematic analysis and this helped to inform the structure of the analysis. This was completed by triangulating information from previous research, the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews. By identifying patterns and common points across the three sources, themes could be identified (Aronson, 1995) and then used to structure the analysis.

When using thematic analysis, it was important to ensure that the themes selected were valid and that when a theme emerged from the analysis of the interviews (Rabionet, 2011), I used the questionnaire and previous research to verify whether it was something that could be explored further. This helped to ensure that it was representative of a cross-section of responses rather than merely something that was raised by a small minority. This was especially true given the interpretivist approach used for my research. Whilst the idea that everyone’s view is valid is important, by bringing together themes identified by a number of participants, I could start to understand the role of the middle manager as it is perceived by those carrying out the role.

The interviews were studied using content analysis, which identified repeated words and subjects in the answers given (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008). This helped to identify the philosophical drivers for each manager (discussed later) and also helped to identify the themes that helped give the discussion chapter’s structure. Although content analysis should be used with care when used in conjunction with semi-structured interviews as there is always the possibility that the questions might be

seen as 'leading', when used in conjunction with other techniques, it can reinforce the validity of the results (Burton, Brundett and Jones, 2008).

The quantitative data from the questionnaire was analysed using a number of statistical tools. Firstly, measures of location (specifically the mean average and the range) were used to compare the data collected with information that was available from the ETF. In addition to this, comparative analysis techniques were used to see whether the results differed according to the demographic and geographic information collected. This was done by comparing percentage responses to each question and noting any outliers. These were then investigated to see whether they might be deemed to be significant. There are limitations to this approach: the differing subcategories that exist within further education (for example, further education colleges, land-based colleges) means that, in some cases, numbers in each category were low and hence statistical analysis was difficult to perform. The alternative (to ignore the categories and treat the sector as one category) would solve that problem; however, it would also ignore the complicated nature of the sector and so would not provide a true picture. Other studies have recognised this diversity (Jameson, 2013; Briggs, 2006) and my research follows that approach.

#### **4.6 Explaining the structure of the findings chapters**

The discussion and analysis sections will be broken down into four chapters. Each will have a specific focus. In brief, the chapters will look at the following.

Chapter 5 examines the question 'what is meant by management in the sector'. This chapter will focus on defining middle management; it will include an analysis of the key aspects of the role, how new managers are recruited and how they are supported through the transition from lecturer to manager. Drawing on work from Busher and Harris (1999), Ecclestone (2002) and others, it will aim to understand the process that managers go through when they take the job and how best they can be supported.

Chapter 6 examines 'who are the manager'. Specifically, it will analyse who the middle managers are and how the change in role affects them. It will

cover the strategies new managers use in order to cope with their new role, and will explore their self-identity and how others perceive them. In addition, it will attempt to analyse the motivation of staff when they take the job of a middle manager.

Chapter 7 looks at the transitions people make both into being a manager and also when they are managers. This chapter will try to draw the two previous chapters together, explore the emerging strands and examine the environment in which FE managers operate and how new managers can be supported in the transition. It will focus on looking at the shared understanding of management and the managers who operate within this environment. This will then help to inform the conclusion and recommendation.

Chapter 8 will draw together the three previous chapters and link the findings and analysis back to the original research questions.

A breakdown of participants in the questionnaire was given in section 4.3.6; this included a comparison with the national picture that is provided by the ETF (2016). In addition to this, for each manager interviewed, I have provided a brief pen portrait. An overview of the interviewees can be found in section 4.4.7 and further details are in Appendix 1. When introducing each manager, further pertinent details are given before the first quote is used. Information for this has been gathered by talking to their line managers, their peers and also those whom they manage. Where information from these three sources differs, this has been noted.

#### **4.7 Triangulation**

When investigating the research objectives, it was important to me to look at a range of sources of evidence before reaching any conclusions. This process ensured that the potential for bias or misunderstanding was reduced and a more accurate reflection was possible. The purpose of triangulation in quantitative and qualitative research is to increase the reliability and validity of the results and, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011:112), it provides ‘an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint’.

Denzin (1970) suggests that there are four possible types of triangulation: 'data triangulation', involving different sampling techniques over different times; 'investigator triangulation', which includes the use of more than one researcher to gather and analyse data; 'theory triangulation', using different theoretical positions as a starting point; and 'methodological triangulation', which provides an opportunity to use more than one method to gather data. The fourth of these, which most closely matches my research, has been further defined to differentiate between 'within-method' and 'between-method' triangulation. A 'within-method' approach would include using variations of the same method; for example, the use of a survey which includes a number of scales to measure the same variable. The 'between-method' approach involves the use of different strategies in one study and, it is argued, provides the benefit of balancing the weaknesses of a given method with the strengths of another, overall providing the opportunity for a more balanced approach. This can be likened to the current trend in the business world for 360° appraisals, whereby the performance of a manager might be assessed by interviewing the manager, evaluating performance records and observing behaviours; the focus would always remain on the manager's effectiveness but the method of data collection would vary.

It is important to be aware that the process of triangulation does not provide certainty in my research; instead, it allows me to investigate differing viewpoints and indeed assess the validity and reliability of information given previously. Merely using three (or indeed multiple) methods does not create certainty, as illustrated by this quote from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

As I started my motor Daisy peremptorily called:

"Wait! I forgot to ask you something, and it's important. We heard you were engaged to a girl out West."

"That's right", corroborated Tom kindly. "We heard you were engaged."

"It's a libel. I'm too poor".

“But we heard it”, insisted Daisy... “We heard it from three people so it must be true.”

(Fitzgerald, 1925:22)

Clearly, any research method may be flawed and it would be unrealistic to assume that the convergence of findings from more than one method necessarily means that the findings are indisputable. An alternative viewpoint would be that triangulation offers a device for generating divergent data, as highlighted in this account:

The use of different methods to investigate a certain domain of social reality can be compared with the examination of a physical object from two different viewpoints or angles. Both viewpoints provided different pictures of this object that might not be useful to validate each other but that might yield a fuller and more complete picture of the phenomenon concerned if brought together.

(Erzberger and Kelle, 2003: 461)

Given the interpretive approach, the differing approaches espoused here fit well into the research, with the qualitative interviews, the quantitative questionnaires and the literature combining to provide methodological triangulation for the study. Whilst other forms of triangulation are more difficult to address, solutions have been put forward. The pilot study addresses the issue of investigator triangulation. A number of colleagues analysed the methods used for any inconsistencies and this gives us greater surety that they fit the research, whilst theoretical triangulation has been addressed with the research, using a clearly defined theoretical framework that is discussed in Chapter 2.

#### **4.8 Ethics**

Due to the nature of the discussion and the topic area, any interviews related to this topic were likely to raise sensitive issues and so all ethical issues were addressed and research guidelines were followed (BERA, 2011). This was done and, in addition, the ethical approval guidelines from the University of Warwick were followed. Voluntary informed consent forms were circulated to participants prior to interview and signed copies were collected before the interviews took place. Participants were

informed about their right to withdraw and anonymity was maintained throughout via the use of pseudonyms for each participant. It is vital when exploring these emotionally sensitive issues that all participants feel safe to discuss them freely and openly. This helps to ensure that an accurate picture emerges, with participants describing their journey as precisely as possible without the fear that their words could be used against them in the future. This is particularly important in a sector where both 'blame' and 'compliance' cultures are used extensively (Silverman, 2008).

To further ensure that ethical considerations were taken into account, all data was stored securely, with a password protected account used. No participants were identified and interviews took place with volunteers. Transcripts were used but, again, were stored securely and will be kept in line with the Warwick University ethics policy. Participants were given the option to receive a copy of the transcript of their interview. No incentives were offered to participate and ethical approval was gained via the appropriate university-appointed committee.

There is one final ethical consideration that must be addressed. As mentioned before, I have worked in the sector in the role being investigated. This means that that I must not put my own meaning on to the research gathered, as my concept of reality is likely to differ to others. There might also be an issue with perception as well. The fact that I chose to leave the sector might well influence how those I am interviewing view me. That can be either positive (I could be someone who has 'served their time') or negative (I was a 'rat leaving a sinking ship') but, whatever the perception, the reality is that there is the potential for this to influence answers.

Wherever possible in the findings chapters I have let the voices of the participants tell the story. Their words are the most powerful voice in the research as they are able to explain their feelings when they made the transition. This qualitative-based approach recognises this potential for bias, and recognises that I might be deemed to be an insider (Newby, 2010), and so although there is still the potential for my background to influence the words chosen, by using participants' own words, any misinterpretations can be identified more easily.



It is also important to address any potential ethical problems with the research process. The semi-structured interviews were likely to be the source of any problems, with evidence from the initial study suggesting that some participants were reluctant to be interviewed even after previously agreeing. To minimise the chance of this happening, middle managers were given full details of the structure of the interview themes prior to the interview. This gave them the opportunity to check whether they were happy to be involved. The success of this can be measured by the fact that no manager withdrew their consent prior to the interview and all were happy to have their words used after the interview had taken place.

#### **4.9 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I have discussed the research tools and ethical considerations of this project. The discussion has also considered the practical aspects of the project and how specific methods might increase the validity and reliability of the data gathered. The choice of both an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews has been examined and the conclusion is that these methods, together with an analysis of previous research, can help to provide a detailed picture of the role of the middle manager in further education that will help to examine the research questions.

The view that the words of the participants are paramount informs many of the methods chosen. By selecting a semi-structured approach, it enables the voices of managers to be used; this also recognises the heterogeneity of the role. Despite the diversity of participants, the use of thematic analysis can help to draw together some of the common points, whilst content analysis helps identify what managers view as important.

Finally, due consideration has been made of the ethical framework for the university, with all research being passed through the relevant processes to help ensure that it meets the highest ethical standards.

## **Chapter 5: Management – The Shared Understanding**

### **5.1 Introducing the themes**

As noted in the previous chapter, thematic analysis was used to identify any commonalities between responses in both the questionnaires and interviews. When looking at the ‘what’ part of the findings, four common themes were identified. These were all associated with the ‘what’ part of the job as they related to what managers were expected to do and also how the processes impacted on the person. Hence, although the impact might be on the person, the reason for the impact was the job itself and what managers were expected to do.

Firstly, the recruitment process was the focus of many responses. The ad hoc nature of the recruitment process meant that the experiences of many of the managers were variable, with many new managers speaking negatively about what they went through.

The second theme was the multiplicity of barriers to the job that managers spoke about. Whilst there were some commonalities (for example, workload and a general lack of time), a feature was the variety of barriers but also the way in which managers spoke about the need to build resilience. This was especially the case due to the inconsistent support offered when they were appointed. The support generally focused on processes rather than any wider forms of support and, as such, was of only limited support. This analysis of the support available is the third theme, discussed in section 5.5.

The final theme discusses the transition managers make from their previous life as a lecturer to their life as a manager. This includes looking at their self-identity as well as the way in which others perceive them.

## **5.2 Theme 1: Right person, right job? The recruitment process in post-compulsory education**

### **5.2.1 The recruitment process**

A key theme identified within both the questionnaires and the interviews was the variability of the recruitment process and whether it successfully prepared new middle managers for the rigours of the job.

Although writers differ in terms of the exact processes that should be followed when recruiting new staff, there is consistency regarding the overall themes of the process of recruitment. Foot and Hook (2008) talk about a coherent strategy that ensures that all applicants are treated in the same manner. This theme is picked up by Armstrong and Taylor (2014), who identify the recruitment of new staff as the most important function of the organisation. The consequences of selecting the wrong person can be extremely serious, in financial, motivational and even legal terms. Foot and Hook (2008) list a total of 30 pieces of legislation that have been enacted to ensure that the process is fair and equitable for all. They also warn against the dangers of an ad hoc system, as this can be interpreted as a way of getting around legislation and, if careful attention is not paid to the legislation, may result in the organisation failing to comply with equality and diversity laws. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) develop the theme of the cost of the recruitment process. They suggest that the cost of recruiting each manager within an organisation is likely to be approximately £8000, a figure that represents a significant investment in the climate of austerity that pervades the sector. The most recent figures suggest that, between 2010 and 2014, the adult learning funding budget was cut by 35% (Tickle, 2014), and a further 24% cut was enacted for the 2015/16 academic year (Howse, 2015), and this means that money for recruitment is likely to be scarce. The temptation – as Torrington et al. (2011) suggest – is to ‘cut corners’ with the recruitment and use an approach that is cheaper and quicker. The dangers, as the same authors point out, is that the short-term benefit of having someone in place are often outweighed by the long-term consequences of having the ‘wrong’ person in post. Armstrong and Taylor (2014) talk about the importance of having someone who is ‘culturally right’ for the organisation and how the temptation is to go for the safe option of electing a known quantity;

however, this often leads to a conservative, non-risk-taking culture that fails to take into account the problems of changing roles within the organisation, but also, if done on a regular basis, leads to stagnation and a lack of new ideas (Armstrong and Taylor, 2014).

### **5.2.2 The variability of recruitment processes identified**

Within this research, many participants reported that the recruitment process for middle managers varied from being rather ad hoc to being part of a far more formal procedure along the lines of that advocated by both theorists and practitioners. Whereas, in most industries, recruitment tends to be standardised and geared towards acknowledged best practice (Torrington et al., 2011), many managers interviewed and surveyed did not experience this. The majority of managers did not go through a formal interview process, or where one was in place, participants often felt as though the outcome had been predetermined.

When looking back at interviewees' memories of the process, we do need to take into consideration the problems associated with recalling events which occurred some time ago. Holmes, Coughtrey and Connor (2008) discuss the way in which memories of events are often subtly altered after the event. This is often the case when people are trying to justify decisions made (a theme which might well be relevant to middle managers within the sector). In effect, people often view critical events from a positive perspective – telling themselves that they were targeted for a positive reason in order to reinforce their self-esteem and also to remind themselves of past successes (Holmes, Coughtrey and Connor, 2008).

Whilst this might be one way of looking at the process, there are others, and the number of people who mentioned that they had been approached privately before the interview does suggest that, in many cases, senior managers had been keen to appoint certain individuals. Although this 'encouragement' does not necessarily contradict any legislation, the conduct of the interview does require the panel to comply with equality and diversity legislation. Dickens (2007) talks about the difficulties of this due to the framing of the legislation and the necessity that, even if the business interest demands the appointment of one individual, the process

followed should be fair to all. As with most organisations, colleges tend to monitor this by the inclusion of a member of the human resources department on the shortlisting and interview panel; however, it is clear that the power of appointment rests in the hands of the senior managers, with no participant mentioning the human resources department as being influential in either the interviews or the questionnaire.

### **5.2.3 The ad hoc nature of the recruitment process**

The certainty that they were ‘the chosen one’ amongst participants brings to mind the self-fulfilling prophecy approach that Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) posited. Although the panel is likely to be put in place in accordance with the legislation, if participants know the expected outcome, then they are inevitably guided towards it. This appears to be the case in the experiences of many interviewees, who talk about being briefed by senior managers and how members of the interview panel offered supportive suggestions to answers where they struggled.

Belinda’s experience was typical of others. She has worked within education for 5 years after coming out of a highly paid job in industry, where she had experienced some managerial responsibility. She was known within the organisation as a good lecturer who was supportive of colleagues but also someone who was always trying to progress her career and this was known to senior managers within her college. Indeed, when she spoke, it was clear that she had broached the idea of a managerial position with senior managers on a regular basis. She recalled when she first knew that there might be a managerial post within the organisation for her:

My current boss now, had a conversation with me and said ‘you are now on my radar, we need to start looking for something’ and then an opportunity came up. So, I kind of did apply but I was supported to apply.

This experience was backed up by others, although not all were as extreme as the experiences of Jayne, who was formerly working within the compulsory sector. She was noted as an inspirational teacher who had won several awards for her teaching. In addition, she had worked with local

colleges in facilitating opportunities for the 14-16-year-old students to attend colleges. As part of this role, she had met several senior managers and her experiences suggest that she had impressed them sufficiently for them to want to recruit her as a middle manager:

So, I went across for what I thought was an informal, I thought, interview/meeting with the Principal and two Deputy Principals, possibly even the Chair of Governors. I nipped in at my lunch break (laughs) and really, I was interviewing them more than they were interviewing me, as I wasn't really that bothered if that makes sense?

Jayne goes on to describe a process that focused on senior managers within the organisation trying to convince her to accept the job offer. As she notes, it was clear that the interviewing process had been reversed and a high-performing teacher had been selected as the ideal middle manager rather than the organisation thinking about who was best placed to deal with the challenges of the role. The standard role of the middle manager, that of 'mediating tensions and change and filtering competing messages from "above and below"' (Briggs, 2001:13), was not something that Jayne had had any experience of beforehand. In effect, she had been identified and any standard recruitment procedures had been bypassed as the decision as to who to appoint had already been made.

A similar approach was described by another manager, Allison, who was previously an Advanced Practitioner in a general FE college. During the interview, she spoke of her ambitions within her career. Despite no longer working for the college in which she started her managerial career, she remained intensely loyal throughout the interview and this showed when asked about her recruitment. This interviewee was very enthusiastic about the process, but when looking at it through objective eyes, problems are immediately visible:

Well, I suppose I was a really good teacher, an AP (note – Advanced Practitioner) and my boss asked me to shadow her for a while and gradually I took on more responsibilities. I really enjoyed it (Interviewer - was there ever a formal application procedure?)

Yes, definitely, they advertised it internally a few months later, but as it was my boss making the decision and she had asked me to apply then I knew I was going to get it.

Allison did get the job and appeared not to see any issues with the recruitment process, a viewpoint that might be contradicted by others. Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010) talk about the importance of a rigorous and extensive recruitment process that is designed to avoid making a 'bad' appointment that would be costly in financial, reputational and organisational terms. A key tenet they discuss is the reduction in the prejudice of those making the decision. In other words, it is very easy to make a decision based on one factor or in a very short space of time. This 'halo or horns' approach (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010) often leads to decisions being made that bypass official approaches. It relies on previous knowledge, which is often in a different context and links to factors that might not necessarily relate to the ability of the candidate to do the job being recruited for (rather than their ability to do their previous job). The experience of Jayne might be viewed as typical of this approach, whilst Allison's experience, although viewed by her as positive, might also be described in the same way.

In a minority of cases, the processes for internal candidates mirrored those for external candidates. Annalise outlines this approach:

There were external candidates, a panel of 5, presentation, everything. It was quite hard when you are an internal as there is an expectation that you are a shoo-in for something and I think that was the most disturbing thing as the perception is that if you go on a secondment or you are working in a department then you would automatically get the promotion but actually, I am pleased I didn't just get appointed as it helped my credibility in that promoted role as I wasn't just there as I was the only one there. There was an external panel, 6-7 people interviewed.

It should be noted that Annalise's background differed from some of the other candidates and it is possible that this influenced the decision-making process. She worked in an NHS training facility rather than a general FE college and her answers to other questions would suggest that the recruitment process is rather more similar to the world of

business than the approach often taken within post-compulsory education. Later in the interview, when describing her move to a large, and well-regarded, general FE college, the recruitment process had more in common with Jayne's experience than the process described above.

#### **5.2.4 Further developing the differences between internal and external recruitment**

Despite Annalise's experience, there appeared to be a clear divide between candidates who were applying internally (roughly 60% of those surveyed) within the organisation and those recruited externally, although even with the latter, the process detailed by Torrington et al. (2011) was rarely followed rigorously. Odile was a good example of someone who had applied for several external jobs and faced a rather different experience. She had previously been noted as a very good lecturer and her transition to a managerial role, whilst not as smooth as it could be, did result in her being viewed as a high-performing middle manager, much in demand and keen to seek out new challenges:

I was working as a lecturer beforehand and the interview process was almost part of the reason why I took the job...it was a group interview and everyone who applied for both jobs came together and they interviewed us as a group. I had ummm maths and English tests then an individual interview and that really helped.

When pressed about the reasons for taking the job, Odile immediately replied that it was talking to the line manager that persuaded her. The personal connection felt was far more powerful than the more formalised recruitment process. Whilst it might be argued that Odile was lucky to be in a position whereby she was offered the job and could think about whether to accept it or not, if we accept that the purpose of the recruitment process is to ensure that the best possible candidate is selected (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2010), the human aspect is an interesting dimension and potentially contradictory. The previous discussion about individual prejudice affecting decisions appears to work the other way, with Odile making a decision on her career based on her



experience at interview and her relationship with one person she met. Whilst Torrington et al. (2011), Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010), Armstrong and Taylor (2014) and others in the field of recruitment stress the need for objectivity, within post-compulsory education, the personal relationships built up appear to be a factor in recruitment, a point backed up by Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010), who talk about how human relationships are at the core of the education sector. This can lead to the similarity effect (Byrne, 1971), whereby senior managers are seeking out those with similar characteristics to work with rather than matching applicants with the job description. Certainly, rereading the transcript of Jayne, Allison and Odile, what comes across is the fact that they became middle managers due to a personal connection that was made.

This relationship-based approach might be viewed as being contradictory to the concept of the organisation as a business that was espoused in the Further and Higher Education Act (1992). The 'jobs for the boys' element that the experience of Jayne and others talk about suggest that the reality is rather different from the initial objectives. This argument might be broadened somewhat away from merely the recruitment phase to wider themes.

### **5.2.5 Ad hoc approaches prevalent in other areas**

Many participants talked about not only the ad hoc approach to recruitment, but also to other elements of the organisation, most notably training, support and organisational goals. Peters and Waterman (1982), in their influential management book *In Search of Excellence*, talk about the need for an organisation to have a very clear structure and very clear goals. They call this the need for simultaneous 'loose/tight' properties (Peters and Waterman, 1982) and stress the need for the organisation to have clearly defined and deeply embedded goals and a culture that permeates everything. Hence, the concept of ad hoc is seen as alien in this model and everything needs to be clearly controlled. That is not to say that an ad hoc approach is always viewed as wrong or poor practice. Indeed, Peters and Waterman (1982) talk about the need for 'a bias for action', which they define as being a process of active decision making.

Organisational structures are seen as important but employees should not be bound by them.

It is difficult to discover the reasons for the ad hoc nature of much of the sector, other than to quote many of the pressures that respondents to the questionnaire talked about, most notably the financial pressures, the ever-changing government priorities, the performative culture that stresses KPIs rather than more intangible goals and the history of the sector, which suggests that it has been used for many different purposes. Whatever the true reason, however, ad hoc appears to be a key feature.

#### **5.2.6 Summarising the pattern of ad hoc recruitment in the sector**

Overall, it is clear that the majority of recruitment carried out could be described as ad hoc; however, there were some variations. Returning to Odile, the third job interview they described was conducted in a way that mirrors many 'good practice' guides:

This was a senior job. It took two days to recruit me. We all went in as a group and we had a discussion exercise with people observing us and we had to do a presentation to the team we would manage and then we had a panel interview. We were then given two areas where they thought we were weak so we knew in advance what we were going to be interviewed on. This was by the principal and one other person.

Whilst this might suggest that the organisation was committed to a detailed recruitment process that was designed to mirror good practice and also select the correct candidate, the post-interview thoughts of Odile suggest that this was not necessarily the outcome:

In my third and more senior role I really believed I was a little out of my depth and wouldn't have applied were it not for other things going on in my life. So perhaps this suggests that the individual who is going to transition roles also needs to do some kind of personal audit to see whether they want the role or not? Maybe it can be

flattering to be asked to step up and you can forget to check whether you really want or are ready to do it.

This raises a number of issues about the processes used. Firstly, there does appear to be a noticeable difference between the recruitment of middle managers and senior managers. Interviewees in the former category generally speak about a more ad hoc system, whilst senior posts appear to involve a lengthy recruitment process. Odile's experience of a 2-day process that involved testing a variety of aptitudes was a common experience.

The concept of a 'personal audit' is also an interesting one – as has been mentioned before, the recruitment of middle managers does not always involve a structured recruitment process, which differs from the experiences of senior managers. Hence, over the lengthy recruitment process that is in place for senior positions, the hope would be that the candidate would realise the demands of the job, the culture of the organisation and the expectations that would be put on the successful person. With the differing approach used for middle managers, this is not necessarily the case and if they are 'tapped on the shoulder', then this might not be so obvious. Many of the interviewees (and indeed those answering the questionnaire) talked about how they were flattered by the interest shown and this clouded their judgement. This means that they were applying for (and accepting) the job without an in-depth knowledge of what the role entailed.

Secondly, the importance of human relationships is stressed either directly or indirectly by the majority of interviewees. Jayne, Odile and Allison might be the most obvious examples of where appointment occurred due to the personal relationship between people but, turning to the questionnaires, a significant number talked about taking the role due to a senior colleague encouraging them to do so.

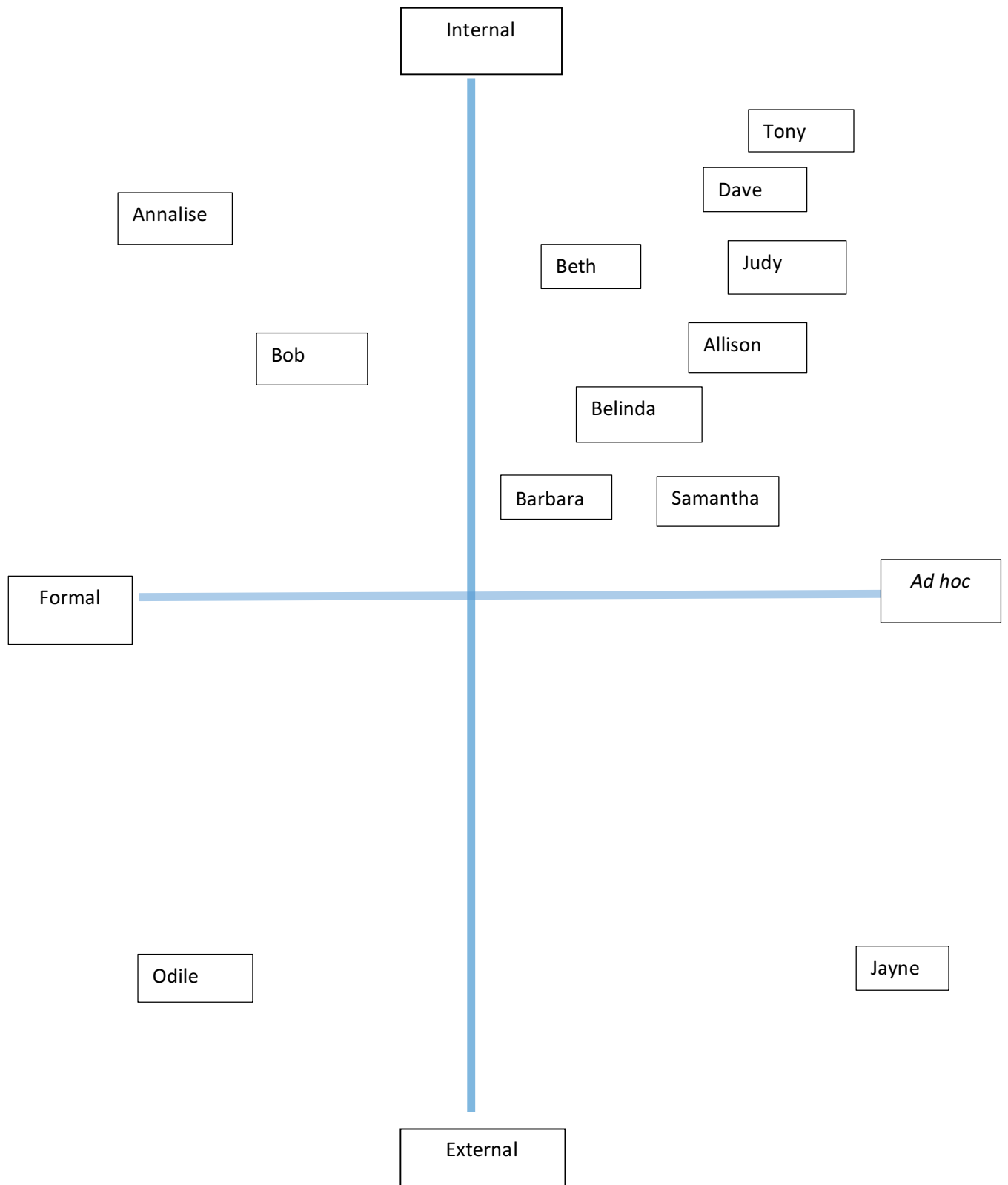
Finally, it is interesting to note whether either of the two extremes of recruitment (ad hoc and a more structured approach) come up with the 'right' outcome. Out of the managers interviewed, Belinda, Jayne, Odile and Allison have all now left their roles within the organisation. All bar

Belinda have moved into higher education, and all still work in a managerial capacity.

Out of those, only Allison was not overtly critical about procedures followed and, even within their interview, the reasons for leaving indirectly supported the conclusion that the interview and recruitment process had failed to adequately prepare them for the transition into the role. The implications of this are clear. Recruiting the wrong person is costly both financially (Bush, Bell and Middlewood, 2011) but also on the self-identity of the manager. In addition, the impact of the job, and especially the impact of not being successful in a job, can significantly alter the self-identity of the manager.

The best way of showing the processes followed is by positioning a number of the interviewees on a graph. This is shown in Figure 2. The graph charts the processes they went through. The *x* axis identifies the level of formality of the process, ranging from the structured, highly formal process described by Armstrong and Taylor (2014) to the more ad hoc approach which indicates that successful candidates did not have to participate in a formal structure or, if they did, their belief was that they were 'the chosen one'. The *y* axis identifies whether candidates were internal or external candidates. The longer the individual had worked for the organisation, the further up the *y* axis they were positioned. When managers had returned to their previous organisations, they were judged according to the number of years that they had completed in total. As can be seen, there is a clear pattern, with the majority of internal candidates going through an ad hoc procedure.

Figure 2: How Middle Managers Were Appointed



### **5.2.7 The recruitment of middle managers**

Concluding this theme, looking at the graph, it is clear that the predominant method used with this sample of candidates might be termed an ad hoc approach and that the majority of candidates were internal.

It is particularly interesting when we look at the four managers who are not grouped in the ad hoc / internal quadrant. In each case, they might be viewed as 'different'. Annalise was one of the few managers who spoke approvingly of the recruitment process, suggesting that it gave her credibility as an internal candidate as everyone could see that she was given the job on merit. Bob concurred with this (although to a lesser degree), whilst at the other end of the spectrum, Jayne's interview was at the extreme end of ad hoc and, from the outcome – she left the sector within a short space of time – it is clear that this was not a successful appointment for either party. Finally, Odile's experience when attending interviews differed according to the level of the job but she was most positive when describing the process for senior managers. Interestingly, none of the interviewees in the ad hoc / internal quadrant spoke positively about their experience and there were a large number of negative comments, the most extreme coming from Beth, whose experience was the reverse of the credibility Annalise talked about.

This suggests that, within the sector, good practice in recruitment that has been identified by HR practitioners is not followed. Good practice stresses the importance of a fair, equitable and transparent process, a focus on ensuring that diversity is acknowledged, organisational objectives but also employee welfare are taken into account and also that the reduction of labour turnover is central to the process (Foot and Hook, 2008). Whilst it might be argued that this might not be a serious problem if the candidate selected is viewed as being a success when selected, the turnover of staff and the many concerns raised by managers suggests that this is not an ideal situation. In addition, the legislative structures that are stressed by many recruitment practitioners are often highly complex and there appears to be a danger that these factors are not always taken into account when recruiting

middle managers. Indeed, the contrast between middle and senior managers does appear to be a stark one, with the in-depth process described by Odile being a typical one for the senior managers within the further education sector.

### **5.3 Theme 2: Barriers within the role – the frustrations of the middle manager**

#### **5.3.1 The obstacles to completing the role**

Managers made note during the research of a long line of obstacles that prevent them from successfully completing the job. The workload often proved very difficult to cope with and participants talked about being forced to choose between tasks due to the size of their workload. In many ways, this links to the concept of the ‘strategic complier’ (Gleeson and Shain, 1999), as managers were making unilateral decisions as to what they viewed as being important for the organisation. Managers were generally not encouraged to use their own initiative, although there were a significant minority who disagreed with this and appeared to have far more autonomy than some of the literature suggests (Briggs, 2006). Within the questionnaire, 78% mentioned excessive workload as a major barrier to completing the job.

The frustration felt by the interviewees was summed up by Judy, a middle manager at a general FE college who has worked in the area of Childcare throughout her career. She became a middle manager ‘because nobody else would do it’ and, despite a few moments of doubt, she has continued in the same job for almost 10 years. She very firmly insists that she has no wish or desire to become a senior manager but the operational problems in her role were obvious:

Interruptions by anybody and everybody, students, staff, phone calls, urgent emails that need to be dealt with...So I am able to get on with the small jobs but larger jobs tend to be put to one side. I often take them home as I know there I can be guaranteed peace and quiet with no interruptions...it has developed substantially over the last

couple of years and I feel now as though I am being asked to do more and more but given less and less time.

This vertiginous pile of tasks was often matched by a frustration over the amount of control or power they had within the organisation. Returning to Jayne, she talked about the job title and the job role: 'There was an Executive Team and we were Executive Directors but we weren't on the Executive Team and we didn't direct anything'. In effect, the participants felt that, along with being the buffer between senior managers and teachers, they were required to be the 'articulating point' (Briggs, 2001), whereby all strategy became reality. In effect, they were 'implementers' rather than 'innovators', a situation that contrasts with Lumby's (1999) assertion of their strategic importance. Indeed, middle managers were often rather cynical about their role, many referring to themselves in terms which conjured up images of a supervisor on a production line rather than a professional capable of making their own judgements. This role was seen as a barrier, as many had been assured at the start of their tenure that they would have a higher degree of control over their workload and their priorities. In common with previous research (Briggs, 2005a, 2006, 2007), they felt their role was not the same as the one they believed they were going to be doing.

Although 3% of respondents to the questionnaire answered that there were no barriers to the role, this was dwarfed by the multitude of barriers suggested by most middle managers. 213 of the 302 answered with a variation of 'bureaucracy' or 'systems and processes', and other popular answers were 'too many meetings' (39%) and 'administration' (31%). Interestingly, all of these answers were ranked higher than 'a lack of money', perhaps indicating the frustrations were more to do with structural factors rather than financial factors. The idea of 'bureaucracy' and 'systems and processes' being barriers was an interesting one and did not always refer to things internal to the organisation. Indeed, the KPI approach that is now systemic within post-compulsory education was mentioned by many managers as a significant barrier and a significant contributor to workload. When reading the comments, the scale of the job becomes apparent. Four comments which clearly articulate the scale of the job are as follows: 'I teach 19 hours and am expected to do my HoD job in



(the rest of the time)', 'however much I do, there is always a huge list of work that must be done', 'I am exhausted and have an excessive workload' and finally 'I am expected to be Superwoman'.

Amidst this litany of tasks and comments about the scale of the job and the obstacles that exist within it, an interesting trend emerges. Looking beyond the first few obstacles, you find problems listed as senior managers, staff, a lack of clarity in the job, external pressures and the culture of the organisation. These are all backed up by comments made that provide some clear evidence as to why these factors act as a potential barrier. When the situation is reversed and we look at the things that help staff complete their role, then the list becomes a familiar one. The top answers include support from others (including senior managers), staff, culture, systems and processes, and communication. These almost exactly mirror the earlier points and suggest that there are a number of core elements to a manager's job that, if they are dealt with correctly, ensure that managers have a positive experience but, if not dealt with correctly, can hinder the successful completion of the job.

### **5.3.2 A lack of clarity and the volume of work**

Turning first to the issues of volume of work and the clarity of the role, the responses suggest that the role confusion that has been identified in the literature (Murphy and Curtis, 2013) does present itself as an obstacle to the successful completion of the role, with many participants complaining about the amount they were expected to do. This was not helped by the overwhelming volume of work. A typical quote from the questionnaires talked about how the workload 'turns the job from being an enjoyable vocation into a war of attrition'. Those who had greater clarity of role (and hence felt as though their job had clear limits in scope) were more positive and they also linked this to the communication networks used, typically talking about 'working with open people who want others to do well'. It appears as though when there is a clear, structured job and regular (and clear) communication with senior managers, this helps the middle manager focus on key parts of the job rather than feeling submerged by the workload. The word 'overwhelming' was used by many of the managers and many respondents talked about the demands that came at

them from all different directions, most notably from the Senior Leadership Team, staff, students, inspectors and awarding bodies, and how they were either left alone to decide on what was important – the strategic complier role (Gleeson and Shain, 1999) – or guided by supportive colleagues and senior managers.

Spillane's (2006) view of distributed leadership appears to be key here. Leadership (and the communication linked to this) is not just about passing a message on, it is about the clarity of the message and about the way in which it is absorbed. The idea that you distribute a message is not enough; it is important to know whether it has been understood, the recipient feels supported and the message has not been affected by 'noise' (Schramm, 1955). Linking this to the answers received in the questionnaire, it appears as though, whilst the workload is significant, it becomes manageable when middle managers feel supported and valued (the response 'I work with a supportive, clear SLT and because of that I have managed to carve out the direction of my role' is a good example of this). Reversing this, when communication is poor, the clarity of role is lacking and there are numerous demands on the middle manager's time, then the job does begin to feel 'overwhelming'. Two quotes illustrate this. The first is from a new middle manager who wrote extensively about the 'shifting sands' of the job. Sandrine qualified 4 years ago and was promoted to a head of department position in the first 2 years of her career. Those around her spoke of her drive and determination and the way in which she supported her own team. This came through when she was asked about strategies:

The only thing that keeps my head above water is my own sense of clear direction that deviates only when there is poorly measured interference, they (SLT) make my life more difficult and they are going along the same path that got us a grade 4 at inspection last time.

Whilst this middle manager went on to describe strategies for dealing with this situation, which revolved around ignoring all but the most insistent of managers, the second quote, from another respondent, Laura, suggests an alternative strategy. Laura had worked in further education for 20 years and, prior to this answer, had outlined her philosophy. She believed in the

transformative element of education and quoted herself as an example of someone who was given a 'second chance' by the sector. She maintained that she 'fell into' the role of head of department. Others around her spoke of her with warmth and used the words 'a people person' when asked to describe her. Her lengthy response when asked about support strategies ended with her saying what got her through the workload:

The workload is impossible, totally impossible and it is the pressure that gets to you. Some days it is OK but other days everybody wants things now. I can feel my body react to the stress, I tense, get headaches and want to yell at the world. It isn't healthy but I just keep smiling because my team depends on me, they really do. They aren't great so need to know I am in control that I know what I am doing...often I really don't (laughs) but they can't know that. Sometimes I feel like a fraud I barely know more than them and I feel as though I will be found out at any moment. Not sure how I get through it all really, it isn't good for me. Someone asked me how I coped once and the answer was a regular prescription for antidepressants and a large glass of wine on a Friday night.

Both these responses can be linked back to the concept of strategic compliance (Gleeson and Shain, 1999), although it is unclear whether managers are aware of their choices or not. Sandrine appeared to have a very clear idea of what she wanted to achieve and how she was going to achieve it. This certainty only deviated when she was presented with tasks that she was required to do by her senior managers and, even then, she worked hard to ensure that her ideas were not submerged. Laura, on the other hand, looked to comply rather more. Her answers focused on the 'impossible' workload and how she managed to complete the tasks. The indications were that she attempted to 'comply' rather more than Sandrine. Interestingly, when talking to senior people in the organisation, Sandrine was viewed with respect whilst Laura, although well liked, did not command the same sort of respect. This produces an interesting dichotomy for managers. On this limited sample, it appears as though strategic compliance in its own right is not necessarily viewed in a negative light, when allied to a clear strategy. In addition to this, there appear to be degrees of compliance. Other interviewees talked of choosing tasks, whilst

others spoke about doing what they could. This will be explored in more depth in the next chapter but the emerging picture appears to be of strategic compliance being a spectrum rather than a more straightforward concept.

### **5.3.3 A problem of staffing**

When looking at the second issue highlighted, that of staffing, it is useful to go back to Busher and Harris (1999) and their initial list of tasks. This element of the job falls under the twin tasks of ‘supervisory management’ and ‘bridging and brokering’. As mentioned, staffing issues were seen as both a positive and a negative, depending on whom middle managers were working with, and how they were supported. This mirrored the findings of Glover et al. (1998). Only 51 out of 302 respondents mentioned staff as being an obstacle – although those that did tended to be vociferous in their assertion that ‘L'enfer, c'est les autres’ (Sartre, 1944) – and members of senior management were viewed as an obstacle by 57 people. Again, those who did mention senior managers tended to be very forceful with their comments; however, they were in the minority. This suggests that, when managers are supported, dealing with people is not seen as a major obstacle in their role. Indeed, for many respondents, it was the reverse. A typical response came from a middle manager in a general FE college in the Midlands:

I have a very supportive team working with me. We try our best to avoid the knee jerk, Ofsted panic and try to think things through. I have autonomy in my role which helps.

The twin points here are the supportive team and the ability to manage their teams without (perceived) unnecessary interference. The manager who responded in this way was emphatic about the amount of work they had to complete but was able to do it due to the support they received both from their team and their senior managers. This pattern was repeated elsewhere, with many managers talking about the workload not necessarily being the problem, it was a lack of clarity, support and changes in focus that proved to be the main obstacle.

In contrast, the problems with not having this support were exemplified by another middle manager in a different general FE college. Nichola has worked in the same college for 10 years and rose through the ranks to become a middle manager 2 years ago. Her experience within the college makes her a respected voice and she uses the network of friends and allies she has built up effectively in order for her to attempt to complete her job:

Without any informal support network, it would be impossible to do the job at all. In fact, many managers (myself included) have had time off because of stress. This has never been an issue in many years in a high-pressure industry. There is a cultural requirement for 'resilience' – which is code for suggesting you should be able to devote 24/7 to work – including weekends – and jump whenever a senior manager tells you to. Much of the workload is completely unnecessary but there is a culture of fear and many sanctions are applied to those who 'fail'.

Whilst this was one of the more extreme responses to the issue of staffing and workload, the points she raises were taken up by others. The use of an informal network for support was common amongst all participants, even those who felt well supported by their senior managers. Odile's experience of taking the job due to her relationship with the senior manager suggests that this support and personal interaction is crucial to being able to do the job. As with the previous respondents, however, the actual workload is often not seen as the major problem, it is everything that surrounds it. No manager suggested that the workload was anything other than significant but there was a very clear division between those who were coping and those who weren't. The former group almost always mentioned the support mechanisms around them (not always from senior managers, although this was sometimes mentioned); the latter mentioned the pressures without mentioning the support mechanisms that were listed by the other group.

#### **5.3.4 The need to be resilient**

The other point raised by this manager was encapsulated by the need to be 'resilient'. This links in to the concept of culture and the way in which

middle managers were often expected to fit into this culture rather than carving it out for themselves. The idea that many were left to 'sink or swim' will be explored in more detail later but it is clear that the culture of the organisation has a direct impact on the role of the middle manager. The simultaneous 'loose/tight' properties that were described by Peters and Waterman (1982) suggest that the basic culture of the organisation stems from the top of any hierarchy and that, although in successful organisations middle managers have some freedom to input their own ideas, they cannot alter the core values that the organisation stresses. If they do, then they find themselves an outsider and viewed suspiciously. One respondent encapsulated this when they said 'everyone has a shared goal and understanding of how we can achieve this. It is very supportive and realistic'. The concept of 'resilience' was mentioned in many of the responses from both the questionnaire and the interviews, and given that the job of a middle manager is viewed as a notably tough job with the 'ideological buffer' (Shain and Gleeson, 1999) role meaning that sometimes managers will be implementing ideas that they don't necessarily always agree with, this is not necessarily surprising. Some respondents seemed to wear the toughness part almost as a badge of honour and were keen to emphasise that they do the job to help others ('being able to make a difference' was a common response when asked why they did the job) rather than for an easy life. In some ways, this might be seen as a part of the cognitive dissonance which will be explored in full later but for many the job, whilst tough, was something that they enjoyed despite the frustrations. None of those interviewed expressed a desire to return to their previous employment; this, whilst surprising, was in keeping with previous research (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). One respondent summed this up succinctly: 'Despite everything, I love my job'.

### **5.3.5 External pressures on the middle manager**

The final point that was both a stressor but also a supporter was external pressures. Given the recent adult funding cuts referred to earlier (Tickle, 2014), it is not surprising that some respondents complained about a lack of resources. Others talked about having to meet government targets (especially concerning literacy and numeracy and apprenticeship

numbers), whilst others bemoaned the power shift in the relationship between students and lecturers ('they are now customers and that means they are perceived to be right'). This changing relationship could be linked to the incorporation of colleges and the move towards a more market-based approach. Courtney (2015) talks of the way in which corporatism commodifies and this means that leadership knowledge commodifies and that is apparent in some of the responses.

However, it would be wrong to portray external influences as a negative; indeed, encouragingly, roughly two-thirds said that they had a reasonable degree of autonomy to respond to external factors, and many respondents talked about the 'opportunities' that came about from the changing priorities. Middle managers viewed their job as 'never boring' and appeared to enjoy the element of unpredictability that arose from the sector.

Despite numerous comments from the middle managers interviewed regarding the lack of training, this did not feature highly on the list of obstacles. Annalise's comments were typical of the majority of interviewees:

There was a policy, actually not sure if policy is the right word, an ethos, that you just get on with it and this sounds awful but... if there was a problem then they would just fix it so rather than (I am just thinking of the right terms to use...) rather than, put a set of training specifically for new managers in, when I started there, they would put people on management training if a gap had been identified after a period in role.

Odile put it rather more succinctly: 'It was either sink or swim'.

This lack of training will be explored in more depth later but, looking at the responses from the questionnaire and analysing the answers from the interviews, it does not appear to be a major obstacle to the successful completion of the role. Those who had attended training were not overly enthusiastic about its impact, and respondents to the questionnaire mirrored Annalise's comments about getting on with it. Many managers talked about the assumption that they knew what they

were doing and did not necessarily need training as they were already experts:

There was no training or effective induction initially. There was a general assumption that because I had been a lecturer then I would know what I was talking about and I knew all the stuff that was needed...I didn't but really just got on with it.

Returning to a previous point, that quality of resilience was much on display in the answers to this question.

## **5.4 Theme 3: Support and guidance – how middle managers meet the challenges**

### **5.4.1 The business role of the middle manager**

The period since incorporation has seen a significant shift in approach within the sector: the marketised post-incorporation approach has meant that the financial imperative has become increasingly important and this has put additional strain on managers. Courtney (2015) encapsulates this view when writing about how a more corporatised view is being taken, rather than the focus being on the educational paradigm described by Randle and Brady (1997). This approach creates business-derived roles and practices that produce 'corporate actors' (Courtney, 2015:214) who are expected to fulfil a role for the organisation rather than pursue individual goals.

The experiences of many participants in this study suggest that this approach is prevalent within the post-compulsory education sector. Odile's experience, detailed above, was typical of a sector where support for new participants is often lacking (Spenceley, 2007). 78% of new managers were not allocated a mentor and even when one was appointed, the support received was often lacking. Out of the 22% who were given a mentor, there was an even split between those who found it beneficial and those who did not see any advantage to receiving this support. Typical comments revolved around the fact that although a mentor had been allocated, the support was lacking due to the workload of the mentor. In effect, the



mentor was too busy to see the new manager and hence they were left to 'fend for themselves'.

The human aspect was one part that was picked up by many participants. This was sometimes viewed in a negative light ('the lack of support from the Principal makes my job a nightmare' was a typical comment from this group from the questionnaires) but, at its best, it was clear that a human aspect could be highly beneficial to the role.

Turning again to Odile:

I felt that the relationship I had with my superior ('Diane') was key to developing my role and style as a manager.

It wasn't just I could talk to her it was about the strategic planning she had thoughts about for the role, to get me to become familiar. She was a mentor, she handed over bits of the role that she told me she wasn't very good at and I found that incredibly empowering as it made me feel as though we were a team and she was recognising that I could do this better. She was not terribly tactful and if it needed tact, I would do it and I began to think 'gosh I can do this' and the fact that she had no ego and she just said 'I am crap at this, you are much better at it', boosted my confidence and made me better at the job.

In short, the human interaction she had with 'Diane' was viewed as a considerably better source of support than any training courses that were provided ('My experience of management training has been so negative'). Indeed, the general view of the training provided mirrored this experience.

#### **5.4.2 The lack of training available**

Worryingly, 58% stated that no training was provided and 13% had been given less than 1 day of training; in effect, 71% had not received any significant form of training. Cross-referencing this with the percentage being allocated a mentor shows significant correlation, suggesting that the majority of new managers were not supported in any meaningful way before they commenced the job. Where training was provided, it tended to relate to systems and processes or, alternatively, to specific policies within

the organisation. Only 14% of all managers were given any formal management training, and for all bar a handful, this was not an accredited training course.

Annalise's experience was typical. Returning to a previous quote:

There was a policy, actually not sure if policy is the right word, an ethos, that you just get on with it and this sounds awful but...if there was a problem then they would just fix it so rather than (I am just thinking of the right terms to use...) rather than, put a set of training specifically for new managers in, when I started there, they would put people on management training if a gap had been identified after a period in role.

In addition, she went on to say:

[T]here was very much a culture that if you are in that position then you will have those knowledge and skills...I think the mistake people make when promoting people is thinking that is where the training ends.

The one area connected to training that was generally viewed in a positive light was where there was a 'handover' period, where new managers were able to shadow their predecessor. This 'sitting next to Nelly' approach, where new appointees shadow the current postholder, proved beneficial, with respondents suggesting that this was a 'fast track' to learning what was important (and, conversely, unimportant) about the job. In some colleges, this was a formal approach that was adopted; however, many managers spoke of the ad hoc nature of this support, whereby they searched out the person themselves rather than participating in a formal programme.

Whilst some organisations avoid the 'sitting next to Nelly' approach, others do view it in a positive light and it is often seen within the private sector, although it is important to mention that different training methods work for different people and the idea of the 'one size fits all' approach is difficult to achieve (Clifford and Thorpe, 2007). The benefit of this method is that a vast amount of knowledge can be transferred in a short space of time. The outgoing person is cast in the role of expert and the newcomer might well be viewed as an apprentice. Interestingly, in other areas of

education, this approach to training is being discussed, most notably in the area of teacher training (Browne and Reid, 2012), where the concept of 'learning on the job' appears to be the favoured option of the government.

Whilst, in many ways, the transfer of knowledge between the outgoing employee and the new manager was seen as good practice by respondents, it is important to include a note of caution here. Some organisations prefer not to have a handover period, as it is often viewed as detrimental to the person coming into the organisation (Clifford and Thorpe, 2007). The person leaving will be doing so due to three reasons: firstly, retirement; secondly, poor performance; and thirdly, they are leaving for an alternative job. None of these reasons is necessarily viewed in a positive light (with the possible exception of the first one) and hence there is a possibility that negative views and perceptions could be passed on if this method is adopted. Returning to Peters and Waterman (1982), they talk about simultaneous 'loose/tight' properties when discussing culture. The key part of this is that they encourage successful companies to keep a very tight hold on culture, especially with new employees. Sitting them down with someone who is leaving does not necessarily mean the transference of a positive culture will ensue. Indeed, some colleges have gone to extreme lengths to prevent this, with examples given of managers being escorted from the premises when it was announced that they were leaving the organisation. This was viewed as essential to prevent the transmittance of a negative culture. Hence, whilst a transition period between employees was spoken of highly by many participants, there are very clear reasons why this might not always be used.

Judy's experiences suggest that a handover period would have been beneficial in her case:

I think it would have been useful, once they knew my predecessor was going, to have had more time to sit alongside her and learn the job as she was doing it rather than having to pick it up once she was gone. Although having said that, as her promotion was within the college I could in theory have gone to her and asked her what she did about that such and such. In practice she wasn't there when I needed her or they were things that had to be decided immediately so trial and error played a big part.

Why did this not happen?

I think...My predecessor had to fall into her post at very short notice so generally within the college things are left until the last minute until a replacement member of staff is in post.

This lack of succession planning is evident in many responses, with colleges, in general, having a lack of clear policies in place for supporting new managers. 39% of respondents had been involved in 'shadowing' of predecessors, although the majority described a process that was informal rather than standardised.

Given that new managers will all have rather different needs and demands, the fact that there is no 'one way' of training when looking at all the evidence should not necessarily be viewed in a negative light; indeed Odile's experience of a personal audit showed an enlightened approach that might well be transferred to other settings. It must be stressed, however, that the feeling of support being viewed in an ad hoc manner was prevalent throughout the interviews and questionnaires, and this led to a high degree of cynicism from many managers. Using Herzberg's (1966) Two Factor Theory, this lack of support might well be viewed as a demotivator, and hence impact on the performance of the middle manager as they start their new role. In addition, the meeting of the hygiene factors that were identified, in particular the need for satisfactory basic working conditions, would help middle managers achieve a basic level of job satisfaction. In turn, this might well lead to a reduction in the turnover of staff. Where training was offered, the majority of managers reacted negatively to it. Whilst formal management qualifications were only rarely offered (and even more rarely taken up), even the bespoke courses that managers took part in were rarely viewed in a positive light. Many respondents to the questionnaires suggested that training focused on processes and procedures rather than the softer skills needed to manage, and they were viewed as ways in which they were encouraged to become more efficient in meeting the KPIs set, rather than methods of developing them as managers.

Samantha, who might be viewed a 'career navigator' (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) reacted rather differently when asked about the support but it is revealing to analyse her words:

[In this organisation, training] depends on the person...there will be new staff training for some and a programme of meetings for them, things like safeguarding for others, dos and don'ts. Everybody has performance management targets and these highlight any areas of need...So is it formalised in any way? [long pause] No, it is pretty ad hoc.

This feeling of a lack of planning for training continued with the next part of the interview, which dealt with how support needs for managers were assessed as they progressed through their career. On the face of it, the steps put in place were positive and supportive:

In reality they are flagged at interview, we also look at what is needed in the department. Data is a key issue at the moment and we have written this into the job description. New managers are offered a mentor and we have a 'leading from the middle' programme for ambitious managers as well as other stuff like future leaders and the Principal's programme. There is lots of support really, all tiered, things like Masters programmes as well.

Whilst this represents a cohesive and supportive programme, the next answer rather undermines this. When asked about the support they received, the response was 'well I am not sure really, everything is ad hoc at the moment'.

Given the 'career navigator' tends to be focused on achieving and protecting corporate objectives and they accept and digest systems and processes (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013), this group of managers are likely to be the most positive, supportive and indeed 'corporate' (Courtney, 2015). The fact that after giving the official line regarding support, the reality mirrored the ad hoc nature of support and training that is detailed in many answers within the questionnaire suggests that structured programmes of support remain a rarity within the sector.

The lack of initial support is concerning when referenced against the lack of clarity that is a particular feature of the middle management role

(Briggs, 2007). Murphy and Curtis (2013) discuss the blurred boundaries that often exist and term this 'role confusion'. Examples include leading a team yet not line managing the team, the difficulty in defining leadership and also the fact that the role often provides 'accountability but not authority' (Murphy and Curtis, 2013:38). This problem was highlighted by many of the managers interviewed. Annalise, a competent and experienced manager in the health service who had recently taken up a new job within a general FE college, described the problems:

I have been put into a course team leader role which I think, without my background of management, I would have struggled with and a lot of people are put into Course Team leader roles without fully understanding what it involves and the issues that you are faced with.

She went on to describe the 'sink or swim' process that was discussed by Odile. Her subsequent success within the role appeared to be based more on her previous experience and expertise than anything that was put in place by the organisation.

Whilst Annalise clearly survived, and indeed thrived, in her role, the experience of Jayne ties together the two threads of a lack of support and also the ambiguity of role. To fully link the two strands, it is worth looking at a number of extracts from the interview. These highlight the ad hoc nature of the support and also the confusion that this manager faced. It is worth noting that this manager was a very successful teacher and subsequently a high-performing head of department within the compulsory sector and was lured to the post-compulsory sector with an offer of an increased salary and the chance to lead a new project. When appointed, however, their experience echoed the 'ideological buffer' approach described by Gleeson and Shain (1999) and they were pulled in a number of directions rather than allowed to make their own decisions.

When asked about training offered, their reply described a typically ad hoc approach but then began to address the issue of role clarity:

Ummm...I wouldn't say that I was given training. They set me up with an induction programme where I went round all the campuses and met all the key personnel. Umm there were two other Executive Directors who started at the same time as me, but they were very experienced in FE. I had had no experience of FE at all, so they were talking about the LSC and I didn't have a clue what they were talking about! That was how much...I had no idea what was going on, I didn't understand the language, I didn't understand when they were talking about retention what they meant. Anything! I had absolutely no knowledge of FE.

This lack of knowledge about the sector, and subsequent lack of knowledge as to what their role actually entailed, was rectified not by line managers but by colleagues:

Well, Executive Director A, who started at the same time. She was really good and she would slip me notes in meetings or I would meet up with her and say 'what are all these things' and she would tell me!...I needed somewhere 'safe'. I did go to talk to HR Director A ummm that safe, confidential support. Executive Director A helped but I started in October and she was made redundant the following Easter. It was that sort of network that was useful. I suppose I found support.

This peer support, whilst not universal, was mentioned by the majority of interviewees and a significant minority of those answering the questionnaire. Going back to Murphy and Curtis's (2013) point about responsibility without authority, this shines through in the next extract:

[There were] Quite a lot of the external meetings, Deputy Principal A [her line manager] came with me and for a while I think I was not let out on my own into organisations. But that was useful umm yeah I'm not sure really...

I was given piles and piles of papers but I am not sure if that was useful as you need a context when reading. I mean I sort of started reading some stuff I was given that I was then told was a waste of my time.

Nobody identified something as a priority?

No. I think these folders were put together by Deputy Principal A's PA on the Deputy Principal's advice and I think the Deputy Principal suggested, you know, in a point of wisdom to make sure I was informed but I don't recall their being any help in the prioritisation.

When reading this extract, it is clear that Jayne, whilst competent in her own area, was not given the support needed in order to succeed. Returning to Odile's phrase, it really was 'sink or swim'. Although the exact words used often differed, the sentiment behind this phrase was repeated by many managers who came to expect a lack of support and viewed the job as one where you either survived or moved on.

When asked about this lack of support and lack of any guidance in the role, Jayne reflected on her own experiences; however, in reality, she might have been talking about the sector as a whole as her experiences mirrored many others within the sector:

I think it was cultural. I think there were some deep, fundamental, actually I still think there are in terms of what I hear, cultural problems at the college. That was my view. I believe there was something inherently rotten [laughs] I suppose I do come in with a significant degree of bias. But I did do the Aspiring Principals and Senior Leaders and that made me more reflective about what was going on umm but it was a place where there were regular restructures which doesn't allow for active trust.

At the end of the interview, Jayne tried to sum up her role within the college and encapsulated the view that managers within the sector were offered responsibility without any of the authority that often goes with it in corporatised organisations (Courtney, 2015):

What could I do? I could...[laughs] I could write proposals for things, once I have been told I could, I could bid for things when I was told I could. I could sort out timetables once I was told I could.

Basically nothing. I remember Executive Director A saying 'We are Executive Directors, but we can't go to the Executive Team and we can't direct anything!'



## **5.5 Theme 4: Moving identities – the transition process discussed**

### **5.5.1 The middle manager as an ideological buffer**

The role of the manager as the ‘ideological buffer’ that was described by Gleeson and Shain (1999) was a key theme from the interviews. All interviewees described the difficulties of switching between a teaching role and a management role, especially in light of the limited support. The shift of approach often came as a shock to new managers whose expectations were that a more affiliative style (Avis, 2005) would enable them to ‘make a difference’. Instead, they were expected to achieve KPIs, and the needs of the students were often secondary to these targets. This was often in contrast to what they had been told before taking the role.

Belinda’s experience was typical of the experiences in the first few months of the job: ‘The first part of the job was a baptism of fire here. It was horrendous.’

This experience was mirrored by Annalise, who felt totally unprepared for the role: ‘I believe that the first management role I ever had was one of the most scary things that I have ever done.’

As with the answers to previous questions, the phrase ‘sink or swim’ typifies the responses to this part of the research. The feelings of being unprepared were also expressed.

This switch in role might be termed a transition and is clearly far more than simply a change in job role. Those answering the questionnaire wrote about the impact that the change in role had on their personal life (in almost all cases, this was not a positive change) and also on their feelings of self-worth. Many complained of feeling constantly tired, whilst others talked about feeling as though they were starting again, despite having many years in education. Managers often talked about the impact on their self-esteem of this transition. One respondent was typical of the majority when they talked about the change from the instant feedback you get in teaching to the more vague, nebulous and often delayed responses you got as a manager. Summing up their current role, they bemoaned the fact that they were having to deal with

a constant tide of negativity from staff and ended with the quote ‘nobody ever knocks at my door to tell me they are happy’.

### **5.5.2 Transitioning as a manager and trying to maintain self-identity**

The impact on home life and the difficulties of maintaining a work/life balance were a common theme. Many of the written comments within the questionnaire made mention of this. ‘My quality of life has declined significantly; I am now doing pointless paperwork till 10pm every night’ was a typical quote, whilst others talked about how they did not see their families during the week. Whilst these comments would not be uncommon for many lecturers, when allied to the changing perception of the role, the stress of the job became evident. This was summed up by one respondent:

I used to have a group of supportive colleagues but when I became a manager things changed. There is now an emotional distance from my colleagues. I am perceived as being ‘management’ and so I no longer have that support.

In short, and in echoes of themes discussed by Merrill (2009), the language used referred to a change of identity. This referred to how they viewed themselves (one person who answered the questionnaire repeated ‘I still see myself as a teacher’ several times in answer to separate questions) but also how others see them. This was eloquently expressed by another respondent who noted that ‘when I walk into the staffroom, all talk stops as I am now seen as a manager’.

This identification as a teacher was something that was taken up by Dave, a manager at a city-centre-based college that had been identified as ‘failing’ at its last Ofsted inspection. Dave described himself as a veteran of the sector and had managed a number of programmes with success and yet, throughout the interview, he constantly repeated the point that he was ‘just a teacher’. When challenged on it, his response indicated his desire to maintain that part of his self-identity:

I am still a teacher, I will always see myself as a teacher because that way I will always put the students first. As a manager, you get side-tracked into pointless activities that detract from the students.

Frankly I only took the job because nobody else wanted it and I will never see myself as a manager.

Interestingly, this rigid approach to his job did not seem to impact on his skills as a manager. His students were positive about him and those working with him viewed him as a good manager. Whether this strong statement was designed to impress on the interviewer his credentials or whether it was designed to affirm to Dave himself that he will always be a teacher is difficult to deduce but it is clear that he viewed the management part of the job, and the relevant KPIs, as something that was secondary to his main task.

This transition appears to be particularly challenging when managers are promoted from within. The move to management can be portrayed as a move to the 'dark side' (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) and, as such, those making that move within the organisation they taught within were viewed differently once the change in role was confirmed. Beth was a typical example. Having worked in industry for many years, she started working at the local FE college as a lecturer on part-time courses in the evening. Her potential as a lecturer was spotted by the Head of Department and, over the course of 18 months, she transferred full-time from industry to education. After establishing herself as an 'outstanding' lecturer and an efficient course coordinator, she was asked to take a temporary secondment to a managerial post in a different department. After a few months, another vacancy opened up as a middle manager in her previous department. No interview took place for this role and so, within a few months of starting as a middle manager, she was managing colleagues that she used to work alongside in her department:

I was very naïve when I got the job and imagined that things wouldn't change and looking back, in one sense, I wouldn't have gone for the job. The problem I had was that I was promoted within the college in the department I was working with so the people I now line manage are people who knew me when I was an NQT [sic], who

mentored me and supported me through that process so they know me, and they know me on a personal level as well as professional level, so therefore I had the added dynamic that I had to alter their relationship with them and that has taken a few years to do. In hindsight, I should have taken on the role but with a team I didn't know, so I could set out my stall.

Beth went on to describe the self-doubt and worry that affected her during the years it took her to redefine her relationship with the team she managed, and also the impact on her life outside the organisation. This included the breakdown of a relationship, problems dealing with the emotional aspects of the role and also stress-related medical problems. The problems that she experienced in making this change brought to mind the concept of the dark side of leadership (Jameson, 2006), which is often linked to the transition of roles. Whilst part of this is about the bullying culture that is sometimes present and the overarching imperative that is the achievement of the KPIs, another part focuses on the changes that management and leadership has on self-identity. Returning to Ecclestone's assertion that a transition affects all parts of the life of the person making the transition (Ecclestone, 2002), it seems as though Beth was ill prepared for the role that she was appointed for, despite the fact that, if you look at purely work-related criteria, she was an ideal candidate, being well liked, efficient, professional and experienced within the organisation.

Beth's experience can be contrasted with that of Tony, a manager at a high-performing college of further and higher education. Tony had remained with the same college throughout his career, rising through the ranks and approaching each position with a core set of beliefs that underpinned much of what he did and the vast majority of answers that he gave. Interestingly, his immediate line manager appeared to share the same beliefs, with Tony talking at length about this. He viewed learning as transformative and talked about his own background (he left school early and completed all his qualifications on a part-time basis) as an example:

I was very much against bringing in loans for students but in today's society people are used to debt and learning is

transformative, it is definitely transformative and there are times in your life that you do something for yourself. I call it securing your future...We can change lives.

He then went on to talk about his day-to-day job. It consisted of both teaching and managing but within the first few seconds, it was clear which part was his priority:

It is a battle with funding and the SFA and we have to fight them. I battle to get what we want. We used to have wonderful Summer schools out there, we used to have queues into the distance, people from all of the community would come along and we can't do that anymore, we used to have everything from guitar playing to academic subjects and it kept the community together. My purpose is to tell people this course is really good and it can change your life. I just look at myself, I was given the opportunity and I wouldn't have the courage without the college supporting me – that is vital. I remember halfway through my course I realised that we weren't doing Trade Union studies anymore, we weren't doing politics and more, it was all about learning things, changing my view and opening my mind. This is what it is all about.

Tony then went on to talk at length about a number of his students whilst answering in very brief detail any question about his managerial role. It was quite clear where he felt his priority lay and it appeared that, thanks to the support of his immediate superior, he was able to continue with this approach. The contrast with Beth was interesting. Whilst Beth was very aware of the needs of a manager in FE and was clearly doing her very best to achieve the goals set for her, Tony, whilst not a natural rebel, was dismissive of them and focused on what he believed was important. The result was that the self-identity of the compliant manager was eroded and it became tied to the department, whilst the more rebellious manager appeared to survive (and indeed thrive) by focusing on his own beliefs and making far less effort to keep the needs of the organisation at the forefront of his thinking.

### 5.5.3 The negative side of transition

Amongst those interviewed, Tony was in the minority, and the perception of the manager and the difficulties that the change in self-identity can have led to many managers outlining unhealthy strategies for coping with the change. Over half of the respondents talked about excessive alcohol consumption being used to cope with the pressures of the role, whilst others used both over-the-counter and prescription drugs to combat the stresses of the job. This mirrored the findings of previous research, which suggested that alcohol and medicine were often used by managers. Manager A from a previous study was a typical example of a manager struggling to cope with the pressures of the job:

I was working every evening and I was working every weekend as well. Absolutely exhausting. I did get to the point where I thought, 'I am not well here', and I'm not one to take medicine and I'm not one to go to the doctors, I tend to manage these things myself...but I did get to the point, where I scared myself a bit.

(Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013:12).

Middle managers who still taught, even if it was only a few hours per week, were generally rather more positive about the stresses of the job and indeed often made reference to their self-image when talking about their teaching. One respondent to the questionnaire expanded on this issue and explained why, despite a heavy workload, they insisted on continuing to teach:

Teaching is essential to my wellbeing and also to the proper fulfilment of my role with colleagues and students. It helps me cope and I am at heart still a teacher.

This commitment to teaching (which was mirrored by others in a similar position) provides an interesting counterpoint to the idea that there are alternative paradigms within education: the managerial (as espoused by Randle and Brady, 1997) and the educational (described by Ball, 2003). Previous research talked about how participants moved to the dark side and were then pigeonholed in that way; the research collected in both the interviews and questionnaires suggests that this is

far too simplistic and there are a large group of managers who view themselves as belonging to both groups. Indeed, even referring to the two groups might be viewed as misleading. Around three-quarters of the respondents taught alongside their managerial role and, although this did add to their workload (one respondent even talked about how they fitted in their Head of Department role at lunchtime and in the evening), as a group they were far more positive about their work.

Despite this blurring of boundaries, and returning to the concept of self-identity, there was still a noticeable distinction amongst some managers between those who still viewed themselves as teachers (who happened to manage) and those who viewed themselves as managers. Barbara was one of the most extreme examples of the latter group and, from analysing their responses, it was clear that her self-identity was intertwined with the department she was in charge of:

My motivation is just to do well and I want to do well and I want my department to do well and I want to be seen as someone who is outstanding. For me if I wasn't Grade 1 then I would want to know about why it wasn't and what I had to do.

The description that followed described a routine that was dedicated to ensuring that her department was the best, and any failures reflected badly on her and were not to be tolerated. She had come to the college having worked outside education and was quickly promoted. Her approach to management was to insist that everyone focused on ensuring that the department achieved all of the KPIs that were set for them, and her dedication to the job was obvious from each of her answers. When asked about life outside the college, she responded by saying that she worked late each day at the job, and when asked about the stresses that other managers had talked about connected to the job, her answer was emphatic:

They are not going to sack me because I am doing too good a job anyway, and that sounds really awful but I know that I do a good job and I am running a good department so if that report is not in on Friday then it is not really...Well probably nobody would notice anyway.

The last part of the quote was said with a laugh and revealed a more human side of someone whose self-image was linked more closely than any other interviewee to their job.

#### **5.5.4 Managers succeeding despite the barriers of the job**

Barbara's quote highlighted another thread that was apparent from other interviews. The apparent success of her department appeared to have been achieved despite a marked lack of support (or indeed training). Allied to this was the fact that she was on a lower pay band than other managers and had a line manager who appeared to be, at best, unsupportive and, at worst, deliberately obstructive. In short, she had plenty of reasons to complain and moan about the organisation yet, despite being asked about this, she accepted that this was merely 'part of the job' and she 'just got on with it'. This approach appeared to mirror the theory of cognitive dissonance, whereby people are less likely to concede what they have learnt is useless, pointless or valueless if the learning has been difficult, uncomfortable or even humiliating (Atherton, 2013a). Barbara's induction period could reasonably be described in these terms, yet she was extremely unwilling to criticise anything to do with the organisation and indeed viewed the lack of support as a good way to prepare for the job. This produced an approach to what managers were expected to do in the job that embraced resilience.

This theme was taken up by a number of the other managers and it is interesting to link their initial expectations of what they were expected to do to the realities and how they justified this. Judy's thoughts when asked about what she expected from the job were unambiguously positive: 'I thought I could change the world.'

Yet, when talking about her role as it is at the moment, her response was rather less emphatic, and a question about the nature of the job encouraged a lengthy moan about the problems associated with the job and the difficulties of actually achieving anything tangible other than focusing on KPIs. She talks about the obstacles:



Interruptions by anybody and everybody, students, staff, phone calls, urgent emails that need to be dealt with...So I am able to get on with the small jobs but larger jobs tend to be put to one side.

Interestingly, when questioned about the apparent disparity between her initial enthusiasm and the realities of the job, her answer was surprisingly defensive:

I think the job was what I thought it would be at the start umm but it has developed substantially over the last couple of years and I feel now as though I am being asked to do more and more but given less and less time. I think this comes down to finance and I think this is probably true of the whole sector and possibly beyond the sector.

Judy, whilst the most vocal, was not the only manager whose initial expectations differed from the realities, yet the tendency amongst managers was to justify this and to find a way to complete what they were expected to do. In effect, they were attempting to adjust their cognitions to meet the expectations (Festinger, 1957). This cognitive dissonance seems to occur when the two contradictory elements come together (Harmon-Jones and Harmon Jones, 2008). The initial hope and expectation is replaced by the reality of the job and this is what causes the dissonance. The justification that follows appears to be for their own psychological equilibrium rather than to convince the interviewer.

This attitudinal change (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2008) is also apparent when looking at the support managers receive. The 'sink or swim' mantra that was repeated by many might well owe something to this dissonance. Managers appear to be viewing the lack of support and training as being in some ways necessary to prepare them for the role. Whilst it is difficult to prove whether this is the case, the forcefulness of comments is instructive when thinking about the reasons behind the answers to the questions.

The thoughts of Stella are particularly pertinent at this point. She described her career as 'meteoric' and was at pains to describe how that

had sometimes caused problems with her staff. She projected a ruthlessly efficient image and appeared to be respected by her staff rather than universally loved, a fact that she acknowledged with a laugh and a throwaway comment about not doing the job to enhance her popularity. She progressed into management after a brief career as a lecturer and her recruitment followed the most common pattern described earlier, in that she was an internal / ad hoc appointment. Indeed, her previous comments regarding her recruitment suggested that she was a classic example of someone in this quadrant:

I was told by my line manager that 'you are now on my radar, we need to start looking for something' and then an opportunity came up. So I kind of did apply but I was supported to apply.

When describing the time when she started the job and the initial expectations of what she was asked to do, she was emphatic in her comments and the voracity of the answer mirrored many other managers and brought to mind the 'sink or swim' approach that Odile talked about:

The first part of the job was a baptism of fire here. It was horrendous...the previous manager in that area would not tackle poor performance and capability issues, to the extent that one member of staff actually went under an investigation where the students went directly to the Principal, they were so fed up. The manager had been asked on several occasions to tackle it and hadn't tackled it. I can't handle that.

Yet, when asked to review the experience as a whole and what the job entailed, her response took a completely different tone. The previous question about support had elicited a long answer describing the challenges faced and the impact it had had on her, both professionally and personally. This appeared to be severe and, from an outside perspective, it appeared that she received little in the way of support; however, her answer appeared to be contradictory:

I just think I have had quite a charmed life in this, I have been very well supported, I have been very lucky and it has worked very well but it is very hard work. It is long hours, it is hard work

but it is interesting and obviously at the moment we have all the new funding and all the new participation age and everything is changing and although that is hugely time consuming and a huge workload it is actually very exciting because we have the opportunity to change things.

The answer to the second part was delivered in a manner as to suggest that this was what she truly believed in, even if it contradicted what she had said before and even if it contradicted what a dispassionate observer would suggest. In effect, the cognitive dissonance present had been resolved.

The feeling that promotion to the role of middle manager affected rather more than just the person's work persona was clear. The fact that so many felt it necessary to cling to a previous persona ('I am a teacher') suggests that this was an important anchor in their lives. Yet despite that, in many cases, their answers suggested that they had moved to a different role. The evidence regarding whether they were happy or not in their role and in what the job asked of them was often contradictory, with many talking about the fact that although their jobs were difficult, they enjoyed the challenge. The reverse, though, indicated that the dark side of management (Jameson, 2006) was also present. Apart from the examples already cited, there were numerous references to both the differing ways in which they were perceived and also the lack of anything approaching a balance to work life and home life ('I get home at 10pm every day and work weekends', 'I have a crushing workload', 'I feel tired constantly'). Also worrying was the response to what managers did to mitigate these pressures. Answers often revolved around relying on alcohol, prescription drugs and other things which would not necessarily reflect a healthy lifestyle.

## **5.6 Conclusions**

The four broad themes identified from the respondents to the questionnaire and the interviewees provide a useful base from which to understand the role and, drawing them together, we can identify a number of common issues.

The first issue revolves around the ad hoc nature of the sector. This has its roots in the way in which the sector has learnt to respond to the latest priority and how difficult strategic planning is. The recruitment of new staff is an example of this approach. The majority of staff interviewed were appointed in a manner that would not be viewed as 'best practice' by human resources experts, and yet few, if any, of the middle managers were surprised by the approach. Indeed, some actually talked about getting 'the tap on the shoulder'. Whilst this is not necessarily a problem, it does mean that managers do not always feel fully prepared for the role and there is an assumption that they will be fine as they know the sector. This ad hoc approach manifests itself in other facets of the job, including the support for new managers, the training organised and even the management of staff, where it appeared to be quite normal for staff to have autonomy over their department without necessarily having the support of college-wide processes and procedures.

The second issue relates to managers' perceptions of their jobs. From the outside, it appears as though increased support, a structured induction process and a more rigorous training programme would ensure that the job was rather more satisfying than it currently is. The managers, though, did not always agree and indeed, in some cases, relished the challenge of the job. Many talked about a 'sink or swim' mentality that prepared them for the job, whilst others mentioned the need to be resilient. Although complaints about the job were common, when asked, most appeared to enjoy the job and saw causes for optimism in the future.

A third issue relates to the heterogeneous nature of the sector. Because of this, it was difficult to draw broad conclusions. In some ways, given the diversity of the sector, this is no surprise. The experience of Odile typifies this: moving from one college to another, she found a completely different approach and a culture that came from the top and permeated everything within the organisation. The human relationships that exist within the culture appear to be key to the success (or otherwise) of a middle manager and the communication that exists with others helps the manager with their job.

Finally, the self-identity of the middle manager was raised by almost everyone interviewed. Many had a very clear sense of who they were (often

linked to a former life as a teacher), whilst others had made a transition in their lives and now had a rather different perspective of themselves. Those who had stepped out of 'the bubble' were more critical of the stresses and strains that the job puts on the individual (although that might well be linked to their experiences), whilst even those currently in the role were aware that the job had an impact on other aspects of their lives. There were many glimpses into the 'dark side of leadership' (Jameson, 2006) and a number of examples of strategies to cope with this that appeared to be unhelpful and, in some ways, destructive. Despite all of this, though, the surprising strand was that middle managers were generally content to stay in their job and almost all expressed a passion for the sector that was both surprising and heartening.

## **Chapter 6: The Human Side of the Middle Manager**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter will look at the impact being a middle manager has on the person behind the job title. So far, the focus has been on the role itself, whether it is the recruitment part, the support part or indeed the barriers to successfully completing the role. Towards the end of the last chapter, the transition process was examined and this will be further developed in this chapter. Ecclestone (2002) talks about the way in which a transition can affect all parts of a person's life and this appears to be true for the managers who took part in this research. Whilst, at first, participants tended to focus on the role that they had, after a while, the discussion broadened to include the impact the change in role has had on them as a person. Responses ranged from the changes they made in their work lives to the impact the job had on family life, relationships and their health.

As with the previous chapter, a thematic approach has been used with a major focus on the self-identity of the manager and any changes that occur when they move into the new role. An individual's approach to tasks that they are resistant to is also covered, as is the perception of the individual by others. The philosophical driver of the individual is a common theme in much of the analysis in this chapter, with each manager having a philosophical driver which governs their approach to the role.

### **6.2 Theme 1: The end of strategic compliance?**

#### **6.2.1 Compliance versus resistance**

Gleeson and Shain (1999) argue that employees within the post-compulsory education sector responded to changes in their work environment in one of three ways. The first was compliance, whereby rules were followed to the letter and the goal was to ensure that corporate objectives and orders from managers were complied with and there was no attempt to modify what was asked. This links to the 'delegated steward' role in Dennis and Walker's (2016) typology. The second was a resistance to all change if it did not align with the objectives of the employee. Thompson and Wolstencroft (2013) talk about the 'lone warrior' manager,

who viewed themselves as fighting against injustice and jealously guided their independence. In between these two responses, we found strategic compliance (Shain and Gleeson, 1999); this was viewed as the most common response to orders that did not correspond with what the employee wanted to do. In this response, compliance was limited to orders that were seen as difficult to disobey (as there was a negative consequence if the employee failed to carry out the order) or orders that the employee agreed with.

This approach has been the dominant ideology when looking at management within further education for the last 15 years and stresses that strategic compliance is generally a pragmatic choice for the employee based on educational values that were founded before incorporation. Recently, though, this approach has been challenged (most notably by Orr, 2011) and evidence from this study suggests that this approach has shifted still further and indeed the reality is far more complex than merely slotting managers into one of the three categories originally proposed.

An example of this change in strategic compliance comes from Dennis, who manages an SLDD department in a medium-sized general FE college. Close to retirement and a self-confessed deep thinker about further education, he took the job 'as nobody else wanted it' and his answers suggested that he was still slightly unsure as to why he took the role other than because his colleagues suggested that he would be good at it. Dennis is well liked by the students but is still viewed as a colleague rather than a manager by his staff, a situation that appears to frustrate him as he views it as a barrier to performing his role. His main comment about the role, however, revolves around the lack of autonomy of the role and he appears resigned rather than angry when explaining his response to the constraints of his role:

The biggest frustration is the lack of autonomy. If I could remove one thing it would be that lack of ability to have freedom in the development without having to go 'cap in hand' saying 'can I do this?' I just need to be given the freedom and I need to be told 'there's your budget'. What I do and I'm probably a bit of a reactionary in the camp in that I have a very learner focus, I suppose it goes back to the previous question as well...we are

always told learner is number one and everything should be around the learner and it's clearly not the case...it's finance is number one...with my learners because of their learning difficulties and their learning needs, I tend to focus on them first, so if there is a class that doesn't have a tutor for a day, I will cover the class, so that the learners are having the experience they should have...this week for instance, it was our self-assessment moderation panel and I said 'I can't go to it because I have got to cover a class' and to me it was more important to cover the class than actually stand up in front of a group of senior management people and explain my self-assessment report because they can read that themselves and if they want to argue it, they can come and argue it another time.

Whilst this response has elements of strategic compliance in it, the reality goes deeper than simply choosing the tasks to perform based on educational principles that were rooted in pre-incorporation times. Dennis talks passionately about his philosophy that 'the learner comes first' and this informs everything he does. He is not merely being strategically compliant for its own sake, he is doing it for a very clearly defined reason. This appears to be reflected in his self-image. When asked how he viewed himself, he thought for at least 30 seconds before answering and then talked about making a conscious attempt to distance himself from his previous job, how he changed the way he dressed (wearing a suit rather than the jeans favoured beforehand) and how he tried to create a support network amongst other managers, although the response to that suggested that Dennis's comments on autonomy were reflected elsewhere:

'[The proposed support network] was formally vetoed...We were told that you are not going to meet up as a team without senior management there...Which we felt gave quite a strong message to us...that we weren't necessarily trusted to be professional and come up with our own agenda.

Despite the attempts to change his image, creating a support network for managers and the new suits, Dennis came at the role of a manager from a philosophical viewpoint rather than the more pragmatic approach that Gleeson and Shain (1999) describe. So, decisions on tasks were made less



on the consequences of non-compliance and more on whether their completion fitted his viewpoint.

This approach mirrored that of Max, who was interviewed for a previous study (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013). Max was a new manager and his approach to the role was very deeply embedded in his own philosophy and indeed his own self-image as a champion of his students. Max worked with a lot of disadvantaged students, many of whom lived in hostels, and the vast majority had achieved little in terms of qualifications when at school. The students were unanimously positive about Max and it was clear that his approach was to put these learners first; he was determined to give them the opportunity to have a second chance and was very clear in how he approached any obstacles presented by senior managers:

[Y]ou've seen the pool tables out there...I was told I wasn't allowed a pool table at the front of this building...I went out and got two...and nobody said anything since, they are asking me for the risk assessments but I put those together but all of those things that I have put in place...I have been told 'don't do it'. But I will do it because I know how much the students want it. They have taken my TVs down...I am having to put my TVs back up because the students have asked me for those TVs...The students have asked me for extra toilets in the building because we have got another 180 students coming into this building and there isn't enough toilets...so I have given them the staff toilets. Because it's about the students ultimately but as long as you keep that close to you, you will keep coming in and smiling every day and trying your best.

This approach suggested someone who was clearly motivated by the needs of the students and (like Dennis) someone who was not willing to be derailed from this viewpoint. A student-based educational paradigm was dominant and it was that which determined which orders were complied with. As with many of the other middle managers interviewed, Max's approach meant that he often came into conflict with senior managers, a group that, in general, he views as being out of touch with the needs of his students:

I think what we have is isolation in a way and I also think the people above...without being horrible or rude...I don't think they

have much of a clue if I ask a question...I feel more confident making the decision myself and I think that's why I don't go outside sometimes...I feel more confident with actually making my decision and justifying my decision when it is based upon students and as long as I keep the students at heart, I am not going to be far wrong with the decision I make.

### **6.2.2 Middle managers and Personal Philosophies**

The image that is emerging is of a group of managers who, despite the restrictions that are put on their role, are finding ways of ensuring that their own philosophy is imprinted on the decision-making process. The very clear philosophical approaches taken by Max and Dennis are mirrored elsewhere, with many of the managers interviewed having a very clear approach to their work. What was noticeable, however, was the degree to which they realised what they were doing, that a conscious decision had taken place rather than something that felt unplanned. Managers varied in the strength of these viewpoints, with Max at one end of a spectrum that ran from total compliance to total resistance, and his words suggested he was well aware of this. Dennis was less clear about his role: despite his assertion 'I don't think of myself as a typical manager', he did appear to want to do his best for the organisation, veering away from this only when orders conflicted with his personal philosophy.

Another middle manager who was highly self-aware of both his own personal philosophy but also the demands of the organisation was Hubert. A middle manager in a large and highly successful general FE college in Greater London, Hubert differed from some managers interviewed in that he taught for 50% of the time and it was the needs of the students that were uppermost in his mind. Hugely popular with the students he taught, he used humour and a sharp intellect to lead both the students and his staff. Senior managers within the organisation talked about him as a maverick who did not always follow the rules, but who always produced excellent results for his department. Unusually for this study, he often limited his responses to stock phrases – 'we do what is best for the students' was a favourite and even when pressed, his tendency was to

repeat this. Only once did he elaborate to any great extent on how he viewed his role and how it related to the world outside the college:

The main problems are outside the college – we live and die by rules that are a nonsense and what you have to do is to meet these needs whilst also not losing sight that the most important thing is to ensure that the students are at the centre of everything. Our procedures at the college are so well set that in many ways I just have to follow them...in many ways I am just a cog in the machine. As long as I maintain a good rapport with the student and they pass then everyone is happy! I keep that in mind – I do what's best for the student.

There is an interesting dichotomy within Hubert's answer that is central to how the middle manager behaves and responds to things. On one hand, he very clearly states how he is merely a 'cog in the machine' and the 'procedures are well set', evoking an image of Beynon's (1975) production line worker. This illustrates the compliance culture (Silverman, 2008) that is often seen to be prevalent in the sector. However, the assertion by Hubert and many of his fellow managers that 'the student needs to be at the centre of everything we do' may well run contradictory to this – whilst the college is often portrayed in respondents' answers as a faceless monolith, the students are seen as individuals who need to be nurtured and educated. Max's pool tables, toilets and TVs were an obvious manifestation of this; the great majority of other managers took a similar line.

There were isolated examples of near-complete compliance. Belinda, who described her baptism of fire in the previous chapter, spoke very clearly about how she viewed her job as being to enforce the rules of the organisation and encourage conformity:

One of the things I have found is that I have now have three curriculum teams and I am picking up bad practice in two of them that was allowed to embed and was against the college's rules. So I have members of staff who have full time contracts but only came into work on four days and that was allowed by my predecessor as they did their admin at home so I picked up a lot of that.

When questioned about why lecturers were working at home on the fifth day, it was apparent that this was time 'in lieu' of evening classes or other duties. The college's rules did not recognise this though so Belinda, following the rules, altered the working arrangements to ensure that they matched the rules. When asked about her approach, in common with many other managers, she paused for a long time before answering:

My personality is quite tough on that and I expect good standards and I have high standards, I play by the book and I wouldn't let someone do something that either I couldn't explain to my boss, the HR manager or the Principal with a good rationale or that I couldn't apply to everybody. So if I have to give someone a day's leave because they want to go to something, I say they can't take time in the academic term so it has to be unpaid. I am quite tough on that but some people would let that sort of thing go underneath the carpet but I think that I can't do that for you cos if I do that for you, I have to do that for 30 people and that is 30 working days that I have lost.

This answer raises a few interesting questions. Firstly, it is clear that Belinda was very much trying to conform and, to her, the notion of strategic compliance was not one that she was comfortable with. During the lengthy interview with Max, the only time rules, regulations or senior managers were mentioned was to illustrate why they were wrong and how he got around the problem. By contrast, Belinda mentioned them frequently and, each time, they were viewed as the rules to live by. Indeed, in the course of the interview, she did not mention the students once, whilst Max (and indeed Dennis) mentioned them in almost every answer.

The second point that Belinda raised (and one that will be explored in full later) was the way in which her self-identity was tied in with the department and organisation. She talked about it being her department and clearly identified with it in a way which other managers did not necessarily do to such a great extent. Max, by contrast, identified himself alongside the students, with the staff in the department (and indeed the organisation as a whole) not being viewed as more important, other than as a vehicle for achieving his goals.

As discussed in the previous chapter, middle managers are not a homogeneous group and analysis of the research suggests that the majority move along a spectrum from compliance to resistance. At the extreme ends, there are a small number whose approach is rooted in one or other of the extremes, with Belinda being typical of the former, Max of the latter, but the vast majority move between these two extremes. Gleeson and Shain (1999) view any strategic compliance as a pragmatic choice and there is some evidence to suggest that this is still present; however, this research has found that decision making is often guided by a more pure, philosophical viewpoint. This will be explored further in Chapter 7.

The pragmatic approach was exemplified by Bob, who was one of the few managers interviewed who had gone through a formal interview process (see Chapter 5). He was slightly more experienced than many of the other managers, having worked in his current role for almost 5 years. The organisation he worked for was a highly successful sixth form college in the North Midlands and, when interviewed, he was keen to talk about a recent, successful Ofsted inspection which might well have influenced some of his answers. When asked about decision making and the key roles of a middle manager, his answers appeared to mirror some of Shain and Glesson's (1999) findings:

[O]ur major role is responding to the whims of the latest administration [laughs] I suppose we really need to be creative and flexible in doing this, we need to strike a balance between league tables and the needs of the student and the curriculum. Some managers struggle with this and they struggle balancing this if they are promoted internally. Government policy and organisational policy changes and you just have to fit in as much as you can. Most important decisions we make are about the quality of teaching and learning and delivery in the classroom and putting measure in place to raise this.

There are a number of interesting points made in Bob's answer. Firstly, the pragmatic way in which he is trying to balance competing demands does show a degree of strategic compliance in that he is aware of the importance of certain parts of the job. This shows through in the

comments made about those promoted internally. His belief is that they are still attached to an educational paradigm and often fail to register the importance of the quantitative side of the management job. Finally, his choice of wording is interesting. Instead of 'teaching', he talks about 'delivering' lessons, a common phrase used by managers who do not teach. None of the managers who still taught used this word but by those who were no longer teaching, it was used extensively. Pring (2015) talks about this and suggests that the use of the word 'delivery' was designed to take the student-centredness out of lessons and instead simplify the process by ensuring that teaching was repetitious and hence could be measured in terms of success. Atherton (2013) put it rather more succinctly: 'postmen deliver, teachers teach'.

This subtle changing of words creates an interesting argument about whether managers change in approach as they progress in their job and whether the individual student becomes less important and the KPIs more important the longer they are in post. Whilst Bob's answers suggest this might be the case, the evidence elsewhere is strong that it is the philosophy of the manager that is at the heart of much of the decision-making process.

Returning to a previous quote from Dave, another 'veteran' manager, we can see the difference between the two managers' approaches:

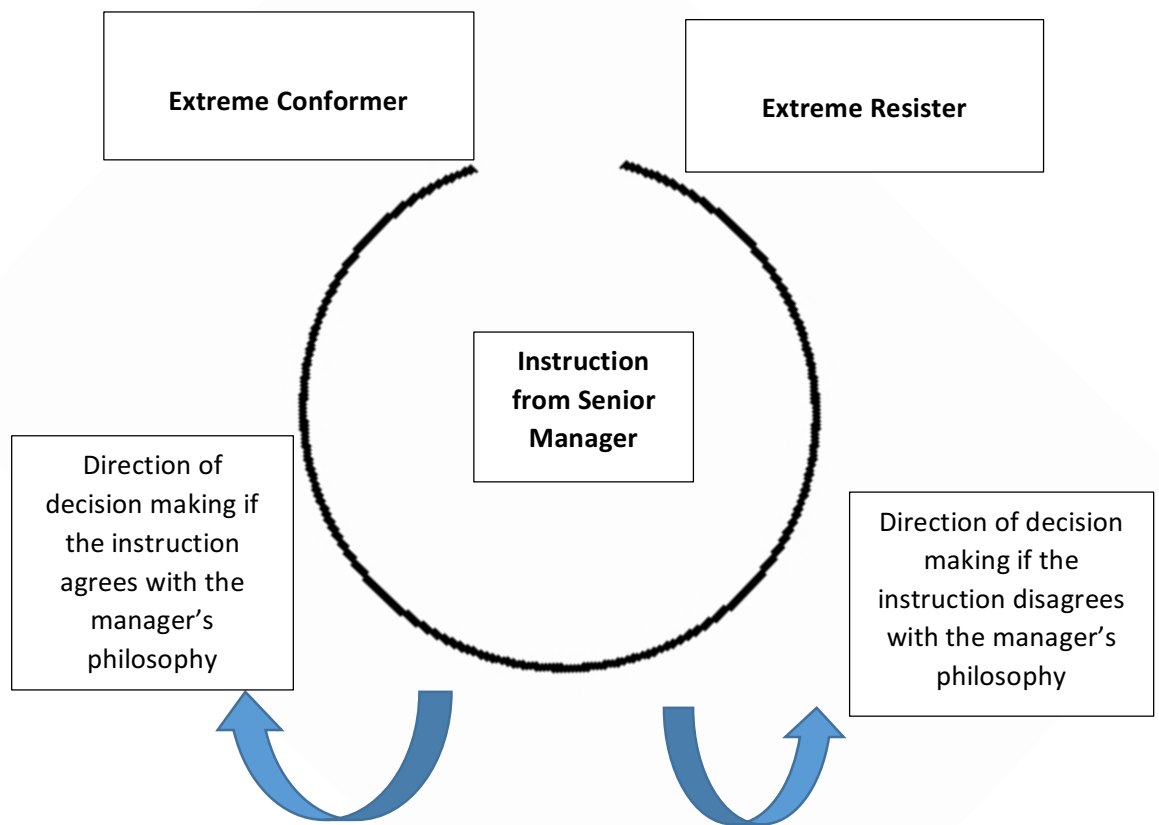
I am still a teacher; I will always see myself as a teacher because that way I will always put the students first. As a manager, you get side-tracked into pointless activities that detract from the students.  
Frankly I only took the job because nobody else wanted it and I will never see myself as a manager.

Indeed, in almost every answer Dave gave, he mentioned teaching, and his answers were framed around this. Other managers took similar approaches and the evidence from the interviewees as a collective is that the length of time someone has been a manager is not directly related to their approach.

So, whilst accepting the heterogeneity of the group, it is possible to illustrate the approaches middle managers take when making decisions and this is presented in Figure 3. It shows that when given instructions by superiors, middle managers make a choice to either resist or

conform. This choice is based on two things: their philosophy and the instruction given. If the instruction aligns with the philosophy of the manager, then the arrow to the left shows how the manager will react: the closer it gets to the top of the horseshoe, the more compliant the manager when given this instruction. This degree of compliance is linked to how aligned the instruction is to the philosophy of the manager.

The same process is enacted on the right side but this time it relates to the resistance – in other words, the degree to which the instruction contradicts the philosophy of the individual manager.



*Figure 3: Exploring the Relationship between Compliance and Resistance*

### **6.2.3 A few examples of how the compliance versus resistance model works in practice**

The model shows that the difference between the extreme resisters (a category Max would often fall into) and the extreme conformers (often typified by Belinda) is actually small. Although their philosophies differ significantly, their responses to instructions remain constant. They frame themselves in particular ways (and do seem to have the self-awareness that this is what they are doing) and there is little movement in their



response. Although they would view themselves as very different, in reality their responses to instructions would be consistent and predictable.

Between these two extremes, however, are most middle managers. The striking thing about the responses from interviewees was that almost all managers had a very clear individual philosophy that was repeated throughout their interviews and clearly influenced their decision making and reactions to instructions.

Taking a couple of managers to illustrate the model, Dennis's philosophy was to put the students first and this was clear from each of his responses, and indeed from his insistence that he would rather teach the students than go to management meetings, as if he did go to the meeting, the students would have to be sent home and their education would suffer. This means that his decision making varied according to the impact his decisions would have on the students. In his words:

Other Heads of School would focus on the corporate agenda, whereas I tend to steer away from the corporate agenda and focus on the learner first. Right or wrong, I don't know it probably makes me very unpopular and that's the way I think it should be and that what I do.

He then gave a list of examples of when he had been questioned about his decision making by senior managers and when he had been 'unpopular' because of an insistence in putting the learner first. By contrast, when questioned about management courses he had attended, he had been to every single one that had been put on by the college, despite apparently never getting anything out of them. When asked why, his answer was simple: 'Well I was free and it was expected of us'.

In effect, he was happy to resist when the learner was involved but, if not, he saw no reason to do so.

A second example comes from Odile, a veteran of several colleges. Her philosophy appears to centre on her approach to managing:

I struggle with the concept that a manager is just a manager. I feel very loyal and embedded in my curriculum area and I am very enthusiastic about it...I am good at talking about the management

of people and the curriculum but...I find it very difficult to engage with generic management theories and general stuff.

This philosophy manifested itself in maintaining positive relationships with people within the organisation and using this to ensure that her curriculum area was promoted and thrived. Whilst it was clear that this was exactly what did happen in each of her three roles, it is also clear that this meant that there was often tension in her relationships with seniors when her philosophy meant that she took a contrary approach to the one instructed.

In her post-interview thoughts, Odile attempted to explain why she had a very positive experience in her first college, whilst the other two were far more mixed. When reading her thoughts, it appears clear that the philosophy of the middle manager needs to be aligned with the decision-making process in the college or else the relationship is not always going to be a successful one:

I appreciated the fact that it was so much easier in my first role when I had support. The second context was really difficult but I concluded that I wasn't a match for the college ethos. In my third and more senior role I really believed I was a little out of my depth and wouldn't have applied were it not for other things going on in my life. So perhaps this suggests that the individual who is going to transition roles also needs to do some kind of personal audit to see whether they want the role or not? Maybe it can be flattering to be asked to step up and you can forget to check whether you really want or are ready to do it. It's easy to blame the college structures...I did too...but I also know that I have choices and I didn't always choose wisely.

## **6.3 Theme 2: More than just a job? The impact of the role on life outside the organisation**

### **6.3.1 The wider impact of transition on managers**

The evidence collected within this study suggests that the transition from lecturer to manager has an impact on factors wider than just a change of

job. Ecclestone (2002) suggests that any transition affects many aspects of an individual's life, and the responses indicate the truth of this. Many managers talked about the stress they were under and how it affected their lives and also the lives of those around them. When asked about strategies they used to cope with the job, many talked about approaches that could be viewed as 'negative'. Alcohol, prescription drugs and the breakdown of relationships were discussed by many and although a few managers talked about how they managed to leave the job 'at work', they were in the minority.

One example of a new manager who struggled to reconcile the demands of work with other aspects of her life was Angie, a new manager in a struggling general FE college in the East Midlands. She came into the job carrying great enthusiasm but was soon met by the multitudinous array of problems that middle managers speak about. In addition to staffing and financial problems, the college had recently undergone a merger and this necessitated a change in procedures and a change in senior managers. The end result was a degree of turmoil that added to the stress of the job:

I went into this job at 100 miles an hour wanting to prove to myself and to my boss and to all the team that I could do it. I always set myself high expectations, and I feel rubbish if I don't get something right and I get really frustrated. What has done for me is it has at times, created a great deal of stress for me and my family, trying to do everything. I have gone home and been in a bit of a mess...I was working every evening and I was working every weekend as well. I was absolutely exhausted by Summer and I did get to the point where I thought, I am not well here and I am not one to take medicine and I am not one to go to the doctors and I tend to manage things myself but, I did get to the point where I scared myself a bit.

Angie's experience was typical of many of the new managers. Their initial enthusiasm masked the problems that they faced and their coping mechanisms when the stresses of the job hit them were generally negative.

Max, who was identified earlier in this chapter as a resister, also talked about the stresses that accompanied the job. By nature, he was a ball of energy and yet the stresses were clear when he talked about the job:

Do you know what? I do now know how physically I get through it. I have stopped taking work home, I just stay here as the job has got too big. At times I am working till one o'clock in the morning and I am beginning to delegate rather more, I have a good team but it is still really hard work. People say I should use a diary to help me become more organised but the job is so, so big. I cope by doing exercise, I have done more exercise than ever before since doing this job. I probably go out running three or four times a week at about 11 o'clock at night. I love doing that.

### **6.3.2 The impact of workload on the lives of managers**

This overwhelming workload comes across in all of the interviews and it is interesting to link this back to the previous theme. Many new managers start with the intention of complying but soon realise that the job is impossible (a common lament) and they need to have strategies to deal with the workload. Those that failed to do this fell by the wayside.

One example was Jayne, who fell into her job within the post-compulsory education sector. As with others, she initially approached the job with enthusiasm and the belief that she could change the world. The reality proved rather different and after a while she became bogged down in the day-to-day minutiae of the world. For Jayne, this was exacerbated by the lack of support that she received from others:

People would just fill in things in my diary and leave me no time at all to do anything. It was impossible to do everything and impossible to cope. We worked with 20+ schools and 5 partnerships which meant my mileage was 350+ a month. It was impossible to do the job.

Again, the 'impossible to do the job' refrain was mentioned by almost every manager and when asked how they would prepare managers in the future, many mentioned this as something to be aware of. The ability to prioritise and make decisions as to what was important was seen as a key stepping stone to being able to do the job successfully. Jayne went on to talk about the impact of the job on her life outside the college. Now

working in another sector, she looks back at her job in the colleges with a mixture of disbelief and amazement at what was expected of her.

Working late into the night and at weekends seemed commonplace within the group of managers interviewed and many spoke about how that affected their personal life. Of the newer managers, only Belinda appeared to have been able to balance the various demands placed on them:

I have a very understanding husband who is fine as long as I just like doing it. So, in my personal life I am very well supported and I have spoken to my boss about how I manage this course and this year and we have agreed that on some days I might decide that I am going to work from home.

This approach, which appears well adjusted and sensible, was a rarity, with the personal lives of managers being viewed as subordinate to the professional life of the manager. More typical was this response from a new middle manager answering the questionnaire:

I have been in my current role for just over a term. Feeling totally overwhelmed and seriously considering a career outside of teaching. I barely see my children and spend almost every waking hour working - there has to be more to life than this.

Given the current problems of recruiting lecturers and managers to education, this must be viewed as a serious concern. This manager was certainly not alone in contemplating a change from their current role. Another respondent to the questionnaire echoed similar sentiments:

I currently feel that my role has no clear purpose and is not valued or understood by those in charge of education, I feel undervalued, deskilled and looking for a new position (ideally out of teaching).

Judy, the middle manager who took the job because nobody else wanted it, underlined the difficulties of balancing everything:

I try to delegate but it is difficult, I take work home, I work during holidays, I work when I am on holiday, I have my mobile on outside work hours. That sums it up really.

Another new middle manager in a land based college was more succinct when asked what the main problems were: 'Lack of time. Lack of gratitude. Lack of recognition.'

### **6.3.3 Sink or swim – the approach taken by middle managers**

What comes through from all of these responses is a feeling that what they were doing was 'fighting fires' and, going back to an earlier phrase, the need was to 'sink or swim'. The vast majority of the negative comments about feeling overwhelmed and under intolerable stress came from new middle managers. The transition that most went through appeared to fail to prepare them for the workload and its impact on all areas of their life. Analysing the transcripts from managers who had been in post for a little longer, it appears that many find ways to cope after a period of transition.

Turning back to Angie, who confessed to scaring herself a little when first appointed, reflecting on her experience in the first year of the job, she vowed to change things in the second year of her employment:

Strategies are in place. If I don't have a deadline and if things can wait, they do. Sometimes I don't work on things at home and when resting, I don't turn the laptop on and I don't look at my phone. I try to spend time with my kids, you know, just chilling and that's really important to me because I need my sleep and I need to learn to switch off, which I wasn't doing at all.

When contacted later about the success of these strategies, Angie was cautious - things had improved but the workload was still overwhelming.

Other managers who had been in position for more than a year had very definite strategies for dealing with the stresses of the job and what was noticeable was the way in which they sought to differentiate between the job and themselves. In effect, their self-identity was not as tied to the job (an issue explored in the next theme). This is often referred to as work/life balance and although different managers dealt with it in different ways, their overall aim was the same.

Bob, the veteran middle manager from the sixth form college, explained his strategy, one that was shared by many others:

You have to make sure that work life does not intrude on personal life as that causes all sorts of problems. I try to stay on top of things and make sure that work does not encroach into my personal life. Sundays are my time to switch off.

This separation was spoken about by many middle managers, with strategies such as switching off phones, ensuring that they had one day away from work and making sure that they imposed a 'curfew' on work being common. Other managers used a range of other strategies, with the only link between them being the fact that they were developed over a period of time and were done so after the manager was struggling to cope with the workload. For those who still taught, strategies were often linked to the classroom: 'Supportive family & friends and great students - sometimes being in the class is such a relief!'

The culture of post-compulsory education and the impact it can have on an individual can be summed up by this quote from Sandrine, the driven manager from Chapter 5 who spoke again of a reoccurring theme – that of the necessity for 'resilience' if a manager is expected to survive:

Without an informal support network it would be impossible to do the job at all. In fact, many managers (myself included) have had time off because of stress. This has never been an issue in many years in a high-pressure industry. There is a cultural requirement for 'resilience' – which is code for suggesting you should be able to devote 24/7 to work – including weekends – and jump whenever a senior manager tells you to. Much of the workload is completely unnecessary but there is a culture of fear and many sanctions applied to those who 'fail'.

The evidence suggests that middle managers go through a period of developing this resilience in the first year of their employment. Those who survive do so by developing strategies in order to cope with the overwhelming workload, although those strategies are generally put in place by the manager with little guidance from the organisation.

## **6.4 Theme 3: Self-identity, self-perception and the views of others**

### **6.4.1 Middle managers' initial self-identity and a non-iterative change of identity**

The final theme identified in this section of the research is the concept of the self-identity and perception of the managers and how this differs from how others see them. As was apparent throughout the interviews, the vast majority of new managers had previously been successful lecturers.

Allison, who we noted in Chapter 5 had been an Advanced Practitioner, was typical of the new managers in terms of experience but also in how they viewed themselves:

As I have said, I was an Advanced Practitioner and really at the top of my game. People in the department tended to come to me for advice on their teaching and what to do with difficult groups. To be honest I didn't see why that would change when I got the job.

Although others spoke with less confidence, the image of the group as a whole was very much that of a group of individuals who were confident in what they were doing and also a group that were not necessarily aware of what was in store for them when they took the new role.

Unlike some changes, the transition was not an iterative one for the individual (Biesta and Tedder, 2008), although looking at the cross-section of managers, most went through the same steps. To return to the phrase used by Odile (and others): 'It was sink or swim'.

This meant that individuals who went through the transition often undertook profound changes in their lives (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) as their previous certainties were replaced with a feeling that they were not sure what they were doing (and often that the job was not what they thought it would be). Jayne's comment was particularly pertinent given her move from the compulsory sector to the post-compulsory sector:

My first meeting felt like the first day at school. I didn't know what anyone was talking about and I didn't understand any of the acronyms and I felt out of my depth.



Many of the managers echoed this feeling and even if the transition was a predicted one (Winsborough, 1980), there was a feeling that managers felt unprepared and the feeling of being 'lost' was typical. The underlying feeling appeared to be that managers' frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997) had been significantly altered without much in the way of preparation. The transformative element of the transition was still in its infancy and the relationships were yet to be fixed. This relates to informal and formal control structures within the organisation. McEvily, Soda and Tortoriello (2014) discuss the difference between the two structures at length and their results resonate with the comments made by the managers surveyed. Prior to their current role, they were seen (and saw themselves) as being a key figure in the informal social support network within the department (McEvily, Soda and Tortoriello, 2014). This role, whilst unofficial, had a great deal of prestige as it was decided, in part, due to the skill of the practitioner. This had a clear impact on the self-identity of the manager and also on their self-esteem. A key feature of informal roles, though, is the lack of accountability and formality, and this changes significantly when the individual moves from the lecturing role to the managerial role. Not only do they need to use alternative skills but the perception of them changes. They are now part of the formal processes and hence are no longer the people go to for informal advice. Whilst, in some organisations, these support structures have been replaced with new forms of support, in the majority of cases studied, the ad hoc nature of support and the focus on process support meant that managers struggled with the transition.

#### **6.4.2 Clinging to a previous identity**

This change in frames of reference and role can be difficult for many managers, and their self-identity changes, so much so that sometimes they cling to their previous identity. Nichola is a good example of this. When last mentioned in Chapter 5, she was using her social network, built up over 10 years, to enable her to do her job, and the way she built up her image was apparent when she talked about her self-identity:

I feel it gives me credibility with staff when I'm asking them to do something or leading a new initiative. I do find however that I need

to book a lot of time out of class to attend meetings etc. I think I was a better teacher before I became a senior leader.

Her view regarding her own personal credibility was shared by her staff, who talked of her as being 'one of us' and 'someone who knows what it's like'. Nichola herself echoed this and appeared to manage by example rather than simply following rules. Under Yukl's (2002) definition, she was seen very much as a leader rather than a manager due to her continuing skill in the classroom (despite her self-deprecating view of her teaching). This feeling of leading by example was a common thread amongst many interviewees. Dave repeated 'I am a teacher' at regular intervals throughout the interview and, in an echo of Coffield (2008b), stressed the importance of teaching as a way in which managers retain credibility. Others also reiterated this, although often concerns were raised about how difficult it was to balance the twin demands of the job, a good example being Sandrine's response:

I think it is important for managers to maintain contact with teaching but I do find it impossible to be a reliable teacher because of the many demands put upon me - i.e. last minute meetings taking precedence over teaching, lack of time for preparation and assessment etc...and the proposed management restructure would have meant teaching 14 hours a week.

The picture emerging is of a group who do want to maintain that teaching role but feel it is to the detriment of their other roles. One respondent from the questionnaire summed it up pithily: 'If I teach more, my management suffers, if I manage more, my teaching suffers'.

Whilst not all managers viewed teaching as an essential part of the role, a significant number did. Nichola and Dave were the most vocal about this but others talked in a similar way. Indeed, those who had made the move full-time to management from teaching were often dismissive of much of their current work in terms which brought to mind Robert Frost (quoted in Coffield, 2008b: Preface): 'The human brain is a wonderful organ. Mine, for example, starts work as soon as I open my eyes in the morning and doesn't stop until I get into the office'.

### **6.4.3 The department as an extension of identity**

Whilst some managers tied their self-identity to their view of themselves as teachers and struggled to hold on to that despite the competing demands of being a manager, others talked about their department as being an extension of themselves. Talking about ‘my department’, ‘my staff’, ‘my area’ and ‘my results’ was common and the success of the department appeared to be linked to the success of the individual in many cases.

Returning to Belinda, whose self-identity is very much tied to her job, when asked about what strategies she used to cope with her job, her response referred to her role and position within the organisation, and her first words reflected many of the interviews:

The first part of the job was a baptism of fire here. It was horrendous. But now I am putting into practice things. We are now starting our planning for next year so I am now having my one-to-ones with my team and my managers are now doing what I want them to do and I now feel much more in control of my team. It is a time thing, once you get them doing things my way they can repeat it.

The behaviourist techniques that were suggested by Belinda’s answer focused around the necessity of ensuring that the department was at the top of the departmental comparisons within the organisation. When asked about whether she viewed the department as her own area and whether the success of the department reflected on her, her answer was unequivocal: ‘Yes, of course’.

Whilst Bimrose and Brown (2010) write about the way in which many workers define themselves by work, Belinda appeared to be a more extreme example, although there were others. Samantha was another interviewee who talked in similar terms, and it is interesting to track her interview and see how her self-identity (and maybe self-awareness) changed as she progressed through her career. At the start of the interview, she talked about the way in which she was encouraged to work hard by her parents and never had time for many activities away from her

studies. Once qualified as a teacher, she rose rapidly to the ranks of management, firstly at a large college of further and higher education:

I was only 28 and so I was very young to be in that position across the college. I was one of the youngest managers in the college at the time. I had to prove myself as I had to go in and talk to assistant principals and curriculum managers who were higher than me and I was telling them what they had to do to implement Key Skills and Functional Skills.

That feeling of having to prove herself could be linked to Jayne's comment about the first day at school but what is interesting is the way in which she talked about telling senior managers what to do, despite her junior position. This confidence in her own ability and her very clear identity as a manager who did things in her way continues when looking at her answer when asked about the support she received. After a short period in her first role, a new line manager was brought in, ostensibly to help her although the reality was rather different:

The person they brought in couldn't cope with the job. Being honest with you, I was carrying this person which was one of the reasons why I moved into the Teacher Ed role. I was fed up of carrying my support and they were getting all of the credit. Once I took the sideways move and I was out of the way, that was when it all collapsed.

Uniquely amongst managers, Belinda's self-identity appeared to stay constant throughout numerous changes in role. Clearly, it may well be the fact that she is telling the story from one perspective (Holliday, 2007) but talking to those around her suggested that this reflected the perception of others as well as herself.

When questioned about this drive and the way in which her self-identity was tied in with her work, she was quick to accept and realise that this was the case; to revisit a previous quote:

My motivation is just to do well and I want to do well and I want my department to do well and I want to be seen as someone who is outstanding. For me if I wasn't Grade 1 then I would want to know about why it wasn't and what I had to do.

As much as I don't like the fact that I am not being paid enough and all of the lack of support, that is life, if I want to do something about it then I will just move on.

The way in which Belinda's self-identity was tied in with her job can be seen by analysing the words that she used when describing her motivation. As with many managers, she talked about 'my department' and correcting faults, but what is intriguing is her use of Ofsted terminology to acknowledge success. This is seen, not only when she talked about a Grade 1 department but also by her choice of wording when describing how she wanted things to be 'outstanding' – an Ofsted term used to indicate the highest possible standard.

Belinda's answer to the final question was also revealing and maybe gives indication that a further transition is taking place. Universally acknowledged by those around her as someone who 'gets things done', there is some evidence that her self-identity was beginning to move away from being directly tied to her role:

I was, not so much now, but I was a workaholic so I probably did a lot of late nights and a lot of stuff at home. I don't now, I made a conscious effort a year ago, and now I take very little home and I have stuck to this.

I do 2-3 late nights here but sometimes I leave early on Friday and I also prioritize and I have learnt recently that if things aren't done, it is not the end of the world. If it is not done today, what are they going to do? You tell them when it will be done and they are happy and you know that most other managers haven't done it anyway. That was a big leap for me. You are never going to be on top of things, you try to meet your deadlines but, if you don't meet it then what is the worst that would happen?

They are not going to sack me because I am doing too good a job anyway, and that sounds really awful but I know that I do a good job and I am running a good department so if that report is not in on Friday then it is not really...Well probably nobody would notice anyway...It was a big change in mindset.

Also for support, I have a really good team and I built that team. The team has expanded and we all support each other. There are lots of different people and it is about supporting each other. I expect them to give 110% all the time but in return if someone wants some time off to watch their child in a school play I will say just go. They know that it is give and take. Without that team, I couldn't do my job effectively so I make sure the morale is there, they are being supported and we have a rapport.

This answer encapsulates the changing self-image that appeared to be occurring for Belinda. The self-confidence was still present but was now tempered by a realism of her importance and the understanding that there was life outside work.

Whilst it may be argued that this is only one person and arguably an extreme example of someone whose self-identity is tied up with their role, analysis suggests that the themes identified here are common throughout. The identification with the department and 'their team' was mentioned by almost all respondents, whilst the identification as someone who has a 'team' shows an interesting shift from the role of a teacher.

#### **6.4.4 A fluid self-identity amongst middle managers**

One area of self-identity that a minority of managers brought up was the way in which their identity shifted according to the role they were in. An example of this comes from Kerri-Anne, who works in a medium-sized college of further education in the Midlands. A very different character to Samantha or Belinda, she was measured in her words and actions and confessed to being 'totally unambitious'. As with many of the managers, she took her current role of Head of Department as 'nobody else wanted it' and although she talked about 'her department', instead of using this to measure herself against external factors, she talked about the need to help the students within the department and to ensure that everyone in the department was given roles that played to their strengths. What was interesting, however, was the way that she recognised how she used different approaches according to the situation:

What I have learned a lot about as a manager is about people's personality and relationships...I got through lots of difficult times and I survived and although I have moved on (from the job) my relationships with people that I have worked with are still good and I did the best I could with the caveat I hadn't yet achieved what I wanted to achieve but one of the things I realised is there is no end point in education as it is continually evolving and it is just fluid. When I realised this there was a great sense of relief.

Whilst some of the differences in approach might be linked to outside factors (Belinda, Samantha and Kerri-Anne worked in contrasting subject areas) and clearly habitus could be said to be a strong pull on their self-identity (Bourdieu, 1990), it is still instructive to see how Kerri-Anne talked about studying people and about relationships when describing her life at work, whilst both Belinda and Samantha took a very task-focused approach. The concept of education (and the job) being fluid and this impacting on how she approached the role is also an interesting one and is mirrored elsewhere. A respondent to the questionnaire, based in a sixth form college, identified the way in which they worked collegiately in the job:

I have very much carved out the direction of my role, drawing on past experiences, being in the job for a number of years, and external contacts in setting up events.

This approach was also used by Odile, who reflected on her approach to management when asked about how she would feel about managing outside her own curriculum area:

I am very enthusiastic about (my subject) and I don't think I would be if I was in charge of Health and Social Care or the Performing Arts.

These differing approaches mirror the different philosophies that were identified earlier. It seems as though self-image and how managers perceive themselves is often tied in with their philosophical approach to the job. Whilst Odile identified herself (and any definition of success) very closely with the curriculum area, Kerri-Anne talked extensively about relationships with people and how this influenced things, and Samantha

talked about outputs and was the one manager who most closely aligned her own identity with that of the department.

#### **6.4.5 Examining the perceptions of others**

Whilst studying how managers view themselves can be completely relatively easily, it is more difficult to identify how managers are viewed by others. The process of looking at how others perceive managers was started in the previous chapter with Beth, a middle manager who was promoted internally from the team to take the job of Head of Department. The lack of support she received has already been noted but perhaps of more interest is the way in which she perceived herself, and how others perceived her. Taking a performative approach to success, Beth can be seen as a successful manager. Her department was a high performing one with record success rates under her leadership. Her perception, though, is rather different and starts with a stark acknowledgment of how she viewed her baptism into the job: 'It is very lonely and it can be very isolated really.'

This is not an unusual reaction to the start of the middle management job but what is rather more unusual is the way in which she talked about the job from an operational and an emotional side:

The operational side of managing is fine but the emotional side of managing people is very difficult and I don't think we are supported in that. I mean it can be quite draining and quite emotionally draining to deal with people who are very upset or angry or scared or whatever the emotions they are going through and you have that directly when you manage people and that is something that we don't get any support with.

It has been better in the last year as we all now have HR Business Partners. It is a brand new role that the college introduced about six months ago and we have two new young, enthusiastic HR graduates from the NHS so they are quite highly trained and you are allocated to that person and they help you manage difficult relationships with your staff. They are there purely for you to give you HR and legal advice, you know processes, procedures but also



to help you to feel confident that you can deal with it, like a sounding board so that is quite useful and that is more about emotional support.

Beth saw her role as being a support to her staff rather than merely ensuring that key performance indicators were met. This might well link in to her philosophical approach to the role but it also impacted on her self-image as she identified very clearly with how people saw her, and how supportive she was seen as being. This can cause problems: being an internally promoted candidate meant that her perception was that she had to work much harder with her team to ensure that she was not seen as having been promoted unfairly. This emotional approach to management could cause problems, though, when that vision was not shared by others around her:

There is another manager I can say that I am getting really upset about this and this is stressful and she just accepts that and helps me through it, whereas I wouldn't necessarily admit that to my line manager as she might see that as a sign of weakness.

The problems associated with being an internal appointment were mentioned by many respondents and were associated with the change in perception. Instead of being a colleague, they were now viewed in a different light and many managers who commented on this in the questionnaire talked about how conversations stopped when they walked in the staffroom, how colleagues were now much more formal to them and how they were no longer included in social events. Whilst this might seem obvious from the outside as the lecturer had 'moved to the dark side', the new managers found it difficult to appreciate as they did not feel any different themselves and hence they struggled to understand fully why there had been a change in approach by colleagues.

The final comment comes from Annalise, the manager who had moved from the health service to a large further education college. By all accounts, she was sensible, competent and was both well liked and respected by colleagues but when talking about how she viewed herself, she acknowledged the way in which she had been prepared and how this enabled her to survive an internal promotion:

I have been put into a course team leader role which I think, without my background of management, I would have struggled with and a lot of people are put into Course Team leader roles without fully understanding what it involves and the issues that you are faced with.

It is often 'you have been here a couple of years, been quite successful, why don't you take on a Course Team leadership role'. It is just the way it goes. I mean particularly in my department, where we are fairly small, every member of the department is expected to be a Course Team leader so within a very short space of time, I was expected to take on that role. There is support there but not necessarily training if that makes sense? There is nothing formal. I am very lucky that our management structure and my managers above me are very experienced and very supportive and in my view, when we are talking about credibility, because they still teach, there is credibility there as well and they have empathy when you go into the classroom rather than perhaps being distant from your staff.

As well as the link back to a previous source of self-identity, that of being able to draw on the credibility linked to being a successful teacher, this also highlights the importance of understanding what is meant by management. The other factor that stands out is the way in which she mentioned the managers above her were experienced enough to prepare her and hence give her credibility. This appears to be in the eyes of her staff but also in terms of giving her the confidence to do her job without any loss of her confidence when the transition from lecturer to manager took place.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

At the end of Chapter 5 a number of issues were emerging and it is interesting to revisit them in light of the evidence analysed in this chapter from a person, rather than role, perspective.

The concept of heterogeneity amongst managers reoccurs on a number of occasions in this chapter and it is extremely important that middle

managers are not viewed as one entity. The spectrum of compliance visited in Theme 1 is one example of this, and there are many other examples. The role is also not a fixed one and so although there are a few extreme examples who base their role, their philosophy and their decision making on a very fixed position, this is uncommon. What is common, however, is that the majority have a very clear philosophical stance that informs what they do and how they do it. What that stance is differs from person to person, the fact that it is there is the common part.

The ad hoc nature of the sector is also apparent in this area. The stresses of being a middle manager are clear from many of the interviews and what is noticeable is the difference between brand new managers and those that have been doing the job for some time. Managers appear to find their own coping strategies after an initial 'sink or swim' period and this helps them complete their job. How those coping strategies are developed differs from person to person although, again, what is noticeable is that in only a minority of cases does the organisation help this process.

The 'sink or swim' approach reoccurs throughout the chapter, with 'resilience' being a key word for all participants. Despite the challenges they face, few managers are willing to accept that they have made a mistake in taking the job; instead, they develop coping strategies and with a mixture of humour and an acknowledgment of the difficulties of the job, they cope. Coping strategies vary from the well-planned and what might be termed 'sensible' approaches of maintaining a healthy work/life balance, to rather more destructive techniques involving drink, prescription drugs and time off for stress.

Finally, the self-identity of middle managers remains at the heart of this research. Due to their challenging nature, the transitions they go through can have an extreme impact on self-image. Most new managers are moving from a role as a respected member of the informal social network within an organisation, a position that often related to a particular skill they have, to a formalised role that sees them being viewed differently by others within the organisation. Whilst some manage this transition smoothly, others struggle with it as they fight to establish a new self-identity to both others and themselves.

## **Chapter 7: Exploring the Intersect between Middle Management and Middle Managers**

### **7.1 Introduction to the chapter**

This chapter draws together the key themes that have been identified within the earlier chapters. This involves understanding the shared part of the role (which could be termed ‘management’) and the individual part (which could be termed ‘the manager’). A key part of this is the influence of a philosophical driver, which is core to each manager’s belief structure. This will be examined and the four dimensions in which the manager operates will be critically analysed to help understand the role. Each of these dimensions can be described with reference to managers’ interactions with their staff and also with the systems used within the organisation.

### **7.2 The middle manager and middle management**

The last two chapters have looked at the ‘what’ part of the job and the ‘who’ part of the job. The former represents the shared understanding that exists regarding the job and might be termed ‘management’. Management represents how the role is viewed by participants, the external aspects in which it operates and what is needed in order to survive and thrive within it. The recruitment, support and training of those who work within management is key to understanding the role, as is the way in which moving into management impacts on the self-identity of those within it. This overall understanding of management helps us to study those who work within this world.

The latter represents the people who operate within this environment and these individuals might be termed ‘managers’. This group is not a single entity and any attempt to generalise findings into creating a ‘typical’ middle manager is fraught with difficulty, as well as likely to lead to an incomplete and potentially incorrect picture being presented.

Previous research has focused on either the tasks that middle managers complete (Busher and Harris, 1999) or, alternatively, has attempted to create a typology of managers (Briggs, 2006; Dennis and Walker, 2016).

Whilst both approaches have value, this research suggests that the middle manager is often a rather more complex entity than the ones previously described. Whilst defining the tasks of the middle manager is possible, it fails to differentiate between what is viewed as important and what is viewed as banal and also fails to explain the extent to which the managers focus on each part of the job. In addition to this, by defining the manager in this way, the human aspect of the role is neglected, and this means that the job appears as a linear sequence of tasks, with the individual seemingly submerged beneath the work rather than being at the heart of the work.

Despite this, previous research does help frame this research. Briggs (2006), Dennis and Walker (2016) and others identify the heterogeneous nature of managers and, by providing a typology, they begin to move towards describing the manager on a more human level. Using their approach, it is possible to recognise how managers have dominant traits, yet even with this approach, the human side of things is downplayed. Each of these typologies slots managers into categories (Briggs, 2006, Dennis and Walker, 2016) and the fact that they often move between ‘types’ is neglected in favour of a static representation of each individual. This means that, by necessity, the types identified are broad groups, rather than the more nuanced managers that this study has found.

### **7.3 The four dimensions a middle manager operates within**

This study has moved beyond the stasis described elsewhere and has found that there are four distinct parts to a middle manager. I have described them as ‘dimensions’ as this represents the setting the manager is in at a given point, and each has been outlined below. In this context, I am using the term ‘dimension’ to describe a social and cultural space occupied by the manager. Sometimes these exist as physical spaces (so, for example, the human dimension might involve interactions within the staffroom) but in most cases, these are merely the theoretical settings in which managers are located when performing the role.

The dimensions can be described with reference to two factors, namely the degree of interaction with other people that occurs and the interaction with the organisation’s systems. This is represented diagrammatically in

Figure 4. When managers have a high degree of interaction with others and also a high degree of interaction with systems, they are said to inhabit the resilient dimension. This is likely to mean that there is a high degree of stress involved, as managers are likely to have to balance organisational demands with those of employees. Whilst these two factors are not necessarily always contradictory, in some instances they will be.

The opposite space is the independent dimension and this is identified by a low interaction with both humans and systems. This dimension is often inhabited when the managers are doing their day-to-day tasks, which could be aligned to the 'bridging and brokering' (Busher and Harris, 1999) role. In general, managers have a surprising degree of independence in achieving goals and this can reduce many stresses felt by the managers.

The final two dimensions (human and moulded) occur when one of the two factors is dominant. This means that managers will be concentrating on either the human aspects or the systems-based parts of the job. Whilst there is likely to be some conflict in each of these dimensions, the fact that there is a dominant factor tends to reduce the potential for conflict; in addition, skilled managers are likely to employ situational leadership techniques (Hersey and Blanchard, 1969) to ensure that they are comfortable in performing the role within each dimension.

Influencing behaviour and decisions within all the dimensions is the philosophical driver of the manager. This represents the lens that is used to analyse the overarching beliefs, values and approaches a manager has. The four dimensions vary in prominence according to a range of factors, most notably the task being performed (for example, the human dimension would be inhabited when completing performance management reviews, the independent dimension when planning for the next academic year), and each manager is likely to have dimensions in which they are more comfortable. This changing role and changing position of the middle manager's identity should be viewed as fluid rather than fixed and, most importantly, it is individual to themselves. This finding links with those of Gleeson and James (2007) in the TLCFE project: they showed how professionals found a way to strategically conform whilst also giving learners what they viewed as being necessary.

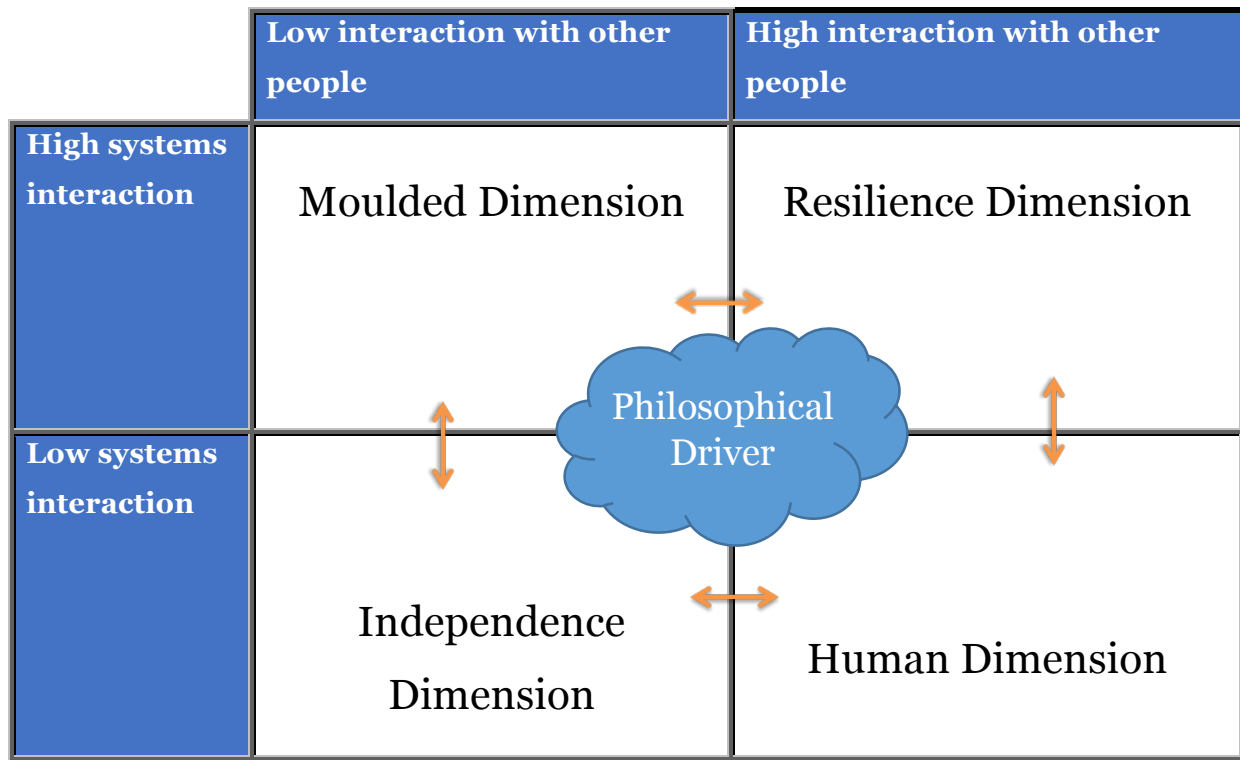


Figure 4: Diagrammatical Representation of the Middle Manager in Further Education

#### 7.4 The philosophical driver of the middle manager

##### 7.4.1 The evidence for a philosophical driver being in place

At first glance, the fact that there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ middle manager within the sector might seem surprising. Given the increased use of words such as ‘compliance’ and the codifying of much of the sector, it is to be expected that a degree of conformity would be present (Courtney, 2015); however, there is only limited evidence to suggest that this has had a significant impact on the role in terms of producing a compliant, homogeneous post-compulsory middle manager.

What is clear from analysing the interviews and the questionnaires is that, for each manager, there is a philosophical driver behind how they act and respond. In many instances, managers were not aware of this driver until they examined their actions, or looked at the transcripts of interviews. Thematic analysis of the responses shows that, in each case, managers repeated specific phrases and words multiple times and this influenced their actions.

Whilst each manager responded in subtly different ways, there were commonalities, with a student-centred approach being stressed by many managers whilst others talked repeatedly about their own department or the trajectory of their own career. What became clear was that the response of managers was influenced more by these internal drivers than external factors; this runs contrary to the findings of Walsh (2006) and suggests that Courtney's (2015) vision is not necessarily always uppermost in managers' thoughts. This led, in some instances, to managers taking decisions (or pathways) that brought them into direct conflict with senior management.

An example of this, and also of the heterogeneity of the role, can be seen by the numerous approaches that are taken to direct requests from senior managers. These ranged from an instrumental, goal-focused approach that stressed the importance of the career of the manager, as discussed by Smith and O'Leary (2013), through to a non-compliant, almost rebellious approach that sought to put the needs of the students above everything else, even if this led to conflict with organisational objectives.

This approach was discussed in Theme 1, Chapter 6 and it could be argued that a spectrum of responses to requests by senior managers could be identified. The two ends of the spectrum would be extreme compliance and extreme resistance, with the two ends being represented by Belinda at the instrumental end and Max at the more rebellious end. It should be noted that this approach simplifies the process rather more than it should. Although the middle managers surveyed had a very strong philosophical bedrock to their decision making, their position on this spectrum was not a fixed one; indeed, they moved along it according to the task being undertaken and how that related to what this research will call their philosophical driver.

#### **7.4.2 The philosophical driver in practice**

The approach of the most obvious 'extreme resistor', Max, was typical. Whilst on the surface he was a rebellious manager who always put the needs of students first and who disregarded many of (what he described as) the 'dictats' from senior managers, the reality was more nuanced than



that. This mirrored the findings of Ecclestone (2007), who identifies the multi-faceted nature of self-identity, as well as the work of Lumby (1999), who discusses the way in which middle managers are sometimes able to lead rather than enact. His decision to put up TV screens for students and change the staff toilets into student toilets (detailed in Theme 1 of Chapter 6) brought him into conflict with senior managers, and his view of those above him was generally negative. Yet even Max did not rebel constantly. In many ways, he worked in a compliant manner for the majority of his job, pausing only to move towards the rebellious end of the spectrum when he believed that the decisions being made were not in the best interests of the students; in other words, his philosophical driver. His description (and that of those around him) of his work ethic, his attention to detail and the work he contributed to the department and the college would suggest that in many ways he did conform in a way familiar to Ainley and Bailey (1997), yet this was on his terms. He conformed as long as the decisions being made did not contradict his own belief structure.

There were plenty of similar examples. Samantha was another pertinent example of a manager who had a very clear approach to the job. On the surface, hers was a highly compliant approach – the archetypal ‘extreme conformer’. Her interview contained numerous references to Ofsted terminology and even her own personal goals were framed with references to ‘Grade 1 outcomes’ and ‘outstanding’, in a manner that suggested compliance to performativity (Ball, 2003). This evidence would appear to position her at the compliant end of the spectrum and yet, when analysing her interview, a dichotomy between the initial impression given and her actions began to emerge. Whilst she talked about the importance of meeting KPIs in words that suggested she had the ‘ability to speak fluently the language of performativity’ (Orr, 2012:58), her actions were dictated by her own personal goals and opinions. She talked at length about her own career and how her current job would help her achieve her goals and she also talked about her work/life balance and how she would not do something if that was being affected. This indicated that although she did attempt to comply, it was on her terms and related to her values. As such, the underlying approach did not differ greatly from that of any of the other managers interviewed, it was only how she presented herself that differed.

These two interviews, as well as many of the other responses, brought to mind a strategic compliance approach to the job (Gleeson and Shain, 1999). Where it differed was that whilst a minority of managers did take a pragmatic approach to whether they should complete a request from their senior management team, the majority appeared to decide on their compliance based on their philosophical approach to education and, by extension, the job. The impression was of a collective group who were principled, hardworking, aware of the culture of the organisation and reasonably compliant, as long as the request given did not contradict any belief structure that they held. This links to Corbett (2017) as well as, more generally, Mintzberg (2009), who viewed middle managers as a group as being key to the success of the organisation and, mostly, committed to its success. However, the heterogeneity of the role can be shown by the fact that these philosophies varied according to the individual manager. Whilst there was some commonality that the needs of the students should be paramount, there was a wide disparity in other approaches. Samantha's career-oriented approach was joined by Dennis's complete belief that he would not do anything that was not in the interests of the student and Odile's belief in the power of relationships within the sector. There were others, and what was noticeable was the repetition of these approaches and the repetition of words that occurred within the interviews. This suggested that they were deep seated. What was interesting to note was that when two managers were interviewed within the organisation, there was not always agreement on philosophy, suggesting that it did not always originate from the organisation, an idea that is explored below.

So, the first conclusion is that although the middle managers within post-compulsory education could be viewed as a disparate group, what draws them together is that each has a philosophical driver that influences their approach to the job. This approach does not suggest that the middle manager's position within it is fixed. Instead, they move between and within dimensions according to the request that they are given and how that fits within their belief structure. It is this philosophical driver that influences much of their work and their actions.

## **7.5 The four dimensions of middle managers**

### **7.5.1 The moulded dimension**

When a manager has high interaction with the organisation's systems and a lower interaction with humans, they could be described as being in the 'moulded dimension'. This suggests that the manager is performing tasks that relate to the organisation's goals and processes.

A theme that has been identified by much of the literature is the importance of compliance within the sector (Silverman, 2008). This would suggest that when recruiting and training managers, this would be uppermost in the minds of those that perform these tasks. In addition, moulding of managers to fit with the needs and approaches of the organisation is an oft-used approach in education (Heystek, 1997). This differs with compliance in that although the organisation would like managers to be compliant, they also want to operate in a slightly looser framework that focuses on the end goal and 'doing the right thing for the organisation' (an idea proposed by Peters and Waterman, 1982). Whilst compliance suggests that the control is overt, a moulded approach is more covert.

The reality, however, appears to be somewhat different. One of the conclusions in this research is the way in which many procedures within colleges of further education might be described as ad hoc, and this appears to be an important factor in the moulding of middle managers. The transition middle managers make is different for each person, even if it occurs within the same organisation. This transition, which can be a time of great upheaval (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010), needs to be supported if it is to be a positive experience (Biesta and Tedder, 2008, as the liminal state described by Meyer and Land (2003) can have a negative effect on the frames of reference (Sherif, 1936) if not handled correctly. Despite this warning, few managers were given a formal induction programme and fewer still were given a mentor to help them through the transition. Even when a mentor was present, half of the managers in this situation were negative about this process, using phrases such as 'no help', 'always busy' and 'never available'. This meant that managers were left to fend for themselves and to work out what was important without a senior reference point. This created an interesting dichotomy, with colleges

stressing a culture of compliance yet not putting processes or training in place to share this with middle managers. This means that the moulded dimension becomes a little less uniform across the organisation as different managers have had different experiences of dealing with systems.

The example of Jayne might be seen to be an extreme example of the ad hoc process of transitioning a middle manager into their new role and expecting them to take a moulded approach but there were many other examples that could potentially lead to a degree of cynicism about the process and indeed might give the impression that staff were being targeted prior to any advertising of positions, rather than an approach that selects the best candidate at interview. As Beth discovered, this can lead to problems when managing, as she struggled to enforce any rules on her team. She was viewed as someone who carried less authority than if they had been appointed in a more formal manner. This had an impact on her own self-identity, a situation that persisted until she left that role.

The contrast with Annalise was stark. Annalise was one of the few managers interviewed who had been through a rigorous recruitment process and had been appointed to her role after outperforming external and internal candidates at the interview. The recruitment process appeared to have a profound effect on both Annalise and her staff. The perception was that she had a high degree of credibility as a line manager and this came from both her own competency but also the process she had been through to be appointed. Her staff were positive about her appointment from her start and the initial frame of reference that her team used to evaluate her effectiveness as a manager was set by the professionalism of the recruitment process.

Others had to win over their teams; the vast majority of managers were recruited informally, with a 'tap on the shoulder' being a common way of lecturers becoming aware that they should apply for a managerial job.

Whilst the recruitment process might be seen as problematic in terms of the perception of those appointed, for the new manager, this was only one problem that was mentioned. The first few weeks were almost universally described as a 'baptism of fire'. In part, this could be due to the adaptive issues associated with getting a new job but the evidence from interviewees suggests that the transition is rarely supported to any great

degree. Returning to Jayne, who resorted to passing notes to colleagues during meetings to try to understand what was going on, her experience was that she had to find her own way through the first few weeks. Whilst many colleges talk about the 'College X Way' to describe how they encourage their employees to 'buy into' the culture, the lack of support given to the managers surveyed suggests that very little moulding takes place. Instead, managers found their own way through the processes and, alongside the inculcated knowledge gained from colleagues, their frames of reference were fixed by these experiences rather than by any formal processes put in place.

In some ways, this independence could be seen as liberating. In contrast to a previous study (Briggs, 2006), middle managers appeared to have far more say in how they ran their department. This meant that they were required to make decisions about what was best for their department and also to ensure that the overall priorities of the organisation were kept in mind. This approach, that mirrored the 'simultaneous loose/tight properties' that were discussed by Peters and Waterman (1982), could be challenging for new managers, as they were not always informed what was seen as important by the organisation. Often managers learnt by trial and error what they were able to do and what they should focus upon. Those who were mentored through this process in a more formal manner, like Odile, were far more able to deal with the stresses that this imposed on managers than those who were not supported to the same degree.

Despite this approach, many managers refused to accept that their transition was necessarily a problem. Although almost all described the first few months in negative terms, the majority viewed this as good preparation for the role. Indeed, the problems associated with the first few weeks were often turned around by the interviewee and described in positive terms, a theme discussed in the next section. In short, their moulded dimension was how they dealt with the systems, albeit in their own way.

### **7.5.2 The resilient dimension**

The positive approach adopted by the great majority of middle managers suggests that this dimension demands a high degree of resilience when performing their jobs. This is often needed where managers have a high degree of interaction with both humans and systems. Although this can prove problematic, a notable feature of the answers given was that when asked whether they regretted taking the role, none of those interviewed said yes, and even amongst the larger sample from the questionnaires, only a small minority regretted their decision to take the job.

The language used by the managers was illuminating in this respect. Many interviewees talked about having to 'hit the ground running' when discussing the first few weeks of their new job but, despite listing a great many problems, both human- and system-based, remarkably few saw this as a major problem. Instead, they talked about the way in which this start helped them prepare for the rigours of the job and how it helped to develop their 'resilience'. The subtext was that if they hadn't had this start, then they would not be prepared for the challenges that they faced in this particular dimension. There are interesting links here with the concept of professionalism. The resilience shown was often linked to the importance of doing a good job, although it should be noted that the demands were often viewed as being outlined from above (as Lingfield, 2012, found) rather than the democratic professionalism described by Sachs (2001).

When reading the transcripts, the concern arises that the managers are experiencing a degree of cognitive dissonance and that their negative experiences are being justified as essential to their professional journey (Festinger, 1957) as well as an attempt to justify the gap between the initial expectations of the job and the day-to-day reality (Harmon-Jones and Harmon Jones, 2008). This is also apparent when analysing the responses to how managers cope with the job. Many of the responses made reference to unhealthy practices, including the excessive use of alcohol and addiction to prescription drugs, yet almost without exception, managers were clear that they would take the job again if offered it, knowing then what they now knew. This suggests either that the problems of role have been overemphasised or, alternatively, that there is a degree of self-justification, or cognitive dissonance, occurring that is encouraging managers to look at

the tribulations faced in an alternative light and see them as positive for their role (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2008).

The resilience needed in this dimension also needs to be seen in the context of the sector. With significant cuts in funding and changing objectives, it should not be seen as a stable environment. Going back to Jameson and Hillier's (2003) description, the sector encompasses a wide variety of forms and is inextricably linked with government priorities. This means that any attempt to codify any roles within the sector needs to be framed against a backdrop of a volatile environment. The experience that the majority of managers had during the first few weeks suggests that this builds resilience and also introduces the idea that they are able to think for themselves rather than merely following a script. Whilst this might contradict the accepted view that 'compliance' is a key concept, it is possible for the two ideas to co-exist. The majority of managers surveyed did understand the sector and how KPIs were a crucial tool for measuring performance. The resilience came from the ability to balance a vast number of competing demands whilst also ensuring that the primacy of the KPIs was maintained. For many managers, this meant balancing the demands of staff with the demands of the organisation.

Managers appear to accept the fact that the job is difficult and they view this as 'normal' in a way which suggests that this knowledge has been inculcated from their previous experiences and their surroundings, as well as their interactions with other (normally more experienced) managers. Although there was often a great litany of complaints about the tasks that they had to do and the barriers that they faced in order to complete the job, very few managers challenged the underlying principles upon which they worked, instead seeing it as 'part of the job' and that it was their responsibility to be resilient. KPIs were disliked but accepted and the focus on a performative approach was also recognised and acknowledged as something that was a fundamental part of the job. Although managers did ensure that compliance was tied into their philosophical stance, their general approach stressed the need to show their department in the best possible light and hence to accept the prevailing culture.

When questioned about their experiences, many managers became noticeably defensive about the training and their initial experiences of the

role. The word 'resilient' was used by a number of managers to describe the key quality that was needed in order to succeed at the job and, as mentioned, the fact that their recruitment, induction and initial experiences did not reflect established good practice was defended, as it was seen as being a good way to develop the resilience in this dimension that they believed was essential to successfully perform the job.

### **7.5.3 The independent dimension**

The evidence collected in this research suggest that whilst managers see 'bridging and brokering' (Busher and Harris, 1999) as an important function, the degree to which they perform this task differs according to their own values, and also the needs of their own department. The notion of 'bridging and brokering' implies that middle managers take the objectives of senior managers and communicate them to their teams to ensure that objectives are met. This often means that they have to either 'sell' plans to lecturers or, alternatively, communicate if there are problems. There is certainly an element of this within the day-to-day lives of the middle managers interviewed but the majority had far more independence than was identified by previous literature (Briggs, 2006) and indeed the majority considered themselves as being remote from the senior leadership team rather than seeing their main role as being one of implementing. Instead, they often viewed themselves as free to pursue their own goals for their department. This also meant that, at times, they were physically separated from their own staff, meaning that when they were in this dimension, contact with both systems and humans was limited. Instead, they tended to be working alone without interference.

Many of the managers interviewed talked about the importance of ensuring that the senior managers within the organisation were happy with the performance of their department, yet there appeared to be an ulterior motive in wanting to achieve this. Whilst the middle managers were keen to ensure that the organisation (and in particular their part of it) was seen to be successful, the responses suggested that middle managers were keen to conform to the KPIs as this would then give them more freedom to ensure that they could pursue their own goals. This



meant that they spent a lot of their working time focusing on achieving the KPIs and ensuring that their department looked as good as possible.

The most extreme example of this was Max and the way in which he rebelled in a way that would allow him to continue to support the students but there were other examples. One questionnaire response talked about how:

If the final figure is in line with what they (SLT) want then nobody questions it, nobody probes deeper, they just accept it, look happy and move on. So, what I do is always make sure the bottom line is good, that way I can keep them happy and fly under the radar.

Whilst there might be an element of cynicism about this response, it is important not to mistake this for a laissez-faire approach to the success of the business and the quality of the provision. Whilst Dennis might be a more extreme example than many, with his constant comments about 'the student being at the centre of everything', his attitude was not unique. The educational paradigm that stressed the primacy of the students was almost always a key factor when managers talked about their role and although there was acceptance of the financial imperative that was seen as vital during incorporation, managers tried very hard not to let this dominate.

The pragmatic side of managers was evident when considering the challenges they faced within this dimension. Although their underpinning philosophy was noticeable when asking them about their role, when looking at the day-to-day obstacles to the successful fulfilment of the role, they took a more practical approach. Managers talked about the overwhelming workload but then suggested strategies that could be used. These obstacles included 'pointless meetings', 'excessive emails' and 'evidencing efficiency' and much of their time was spent trying to avoid these tasks whilst focusing on what they perceived to be more important.

The relationship middle managers had with their seniors was also interesting. Some spoke out about a lack of trust and independence, including one response from the questionnaires: 'There is an assumption that my team and I don't know how to do our jobs'.

The checking and performative approach that was used was mentioned by the majority of managers but, again, it was often accepted as being part of

the job. As the first manager mentioned, participants generally made sure that their KPIs were such that they would not attract any undue attention, leaving them free to pursue their own goals.

A minority of managers spoke positively about their senior leadership team, and a good relationship often allowed managers to pursue their goals without having to rely on subterfuge. Belinda is a good example of this group of managers. Unlike some participants, she works closely with her line manager and this has enabled her to be very open about trying things that she wants to do, rather than merely following orders:

What my line manager in particular is good at, is that she is very creative and she likes curriculum development and she likes new quality ideas. She will agree a lot of things. She is quite pragmatic and she will question things, she won't give you an easy run, but she will let you trial things. Sometimes when you have something that isn't going to make a profit, like a loss leader you are going to try something to see what happens, she will question you, make sure that you are absolutely sold on it, then you can go. You can try it out yourself, without the fear of punishment. There is never the fear that there are negative consequences.

This openness is of great benefit to Belinda. The contrast to Max's assertion that he did not respect any of his seniors is stark but what unites them is the idea that, despite their disparate approaches, they both have found a way in which to carry out both the duties of the organisation and their own personal goals. There are clear links here to their individual philosophical driver, where each looks at the pragmatic, operational side of the job and tries to put their philosophy into practice. This was often done away from others (many managers talked about 'closing the door' when doing these tasks) and participants reiterated the importance of this part of the job due to the benefits it brought if they were able (to use Belinda's phrase) to 'fly under the radar'.

A final conclusion in this section relates to how middle managers work together, and this is the one part of this dimension which involved human interaction. Despite the seemingly different approach to the independent role that takes place in the day-to-day role of respondents (these ranged from a more traditional 'bridging and brokering' role to a respondent from

the questionnaires who locked himself away for a day a week to perform the tasks he viewed as necessary for the job), many participants spoke about the importance of 'sticking together' as a group. Often this response was linked to the limitations on role authority, with 20% of responses to the questionnaire making reference to the difficulties of managing with responsibility but without authority. What was interesting was the response of senior managers to these plans. Beth's experience was typical. When she put forward plans for an informal support group for the middle managers in an FE College, she was immediately told that this was not something that would be supported, and indeed a great deal of pressure was put on her to drop these plans. This experience was replicated in other colleges, suggesting that the grouping of middle managers might be seen as a threat rather than a support mechanism by senior leaders. This view was not shared in the responses of the middle managers, with support being seen as the number one purpose of these groups. In the minority of colleges that encouraged this, they acted as a highly effective support network.

As with other issues, the middle managers interviewed generally found a way around the rules and regulations they were presented with. The response of Dennis typified this resourcefulness: when questioned about what managers did when told that they could not meet on college premises as a support group, he laughed and responded: 'We agreed and then met down the pub'.

#### **7.5.4 The human dimension**

The final aspect of the middle manager is a human dimension where the manager has a high degree of interaction with their staff and far less with systems-based tasks. It is clear that human relationships make up a key part of the job and a lot of the success of the job is related to this. Busher and Harris (1999) outline 'supervisory management' and 'the transformative element' as being key parts of the role and although this research is somewhat dated now, this is borne out by the interviews; however, it also encompasses a much wider element.

The human dimension can be split into three parts: firstly, dealing with staff; secondly, dealing with other stakeholders; and thirdly, what human resource writers call the 'softer' part of management (Pant and Baroudi, 2008).

The responses from both the interviews and the questionnaires indicate that staffing can be seen as both a positive and a negative. The fact that only 52 out of 302 respondents responded saying that staffing-related problems were a major obstacle in achieving their goals should be seen as a positive, but those who did mention staff as being a problem were adamant about how the breakdown of relationships with staff could have a significant impact, not only on that person's work but on the whole department. Judy's experience was typical of those interviewed. She listed staff issues as a major contributor towards her excessive workload but then nuanced the comment by talking about how staff can help achieve the goals of the department. As with the vast majority of those interviewed, she took an affiliative approach to managing her staff and this was linked to her view that staff were 'professionals' and also her view that this created a positive working relationship in the department.

Other managers took up this theme. Annalise talked about how frequent positive feedback was a key way in which she encouraged her staff and she also talked about how this helped to manage people and indeed to motivate them (this echoes Briggs's, 2005b, view of the importance of motivation). Staff became used to feedback and so when negative feedback was needed, they became more receptive to it as they had become used to receiving direct communication from her. This affiliative approach does not negate the importance of compliance within the sector but does represent an alternative to the coercive approach that the literature stresses has been used in the past (Jameson, 2013).

The second element of the human middle management concerns the managers' relationships with other stakeholders. Many respondents talked about the need to 'manage' a wider variety of people than merely their own staff. This list of stakeholders includes a lot of different people but the most common groups mentioned were senior managers, students, employers and parents. The need to have positive relationships with these people was seen as essential to the successful execution of the job and

suggests that skills of communication and diplomacy are important elements for middle managers.

Relationships with senior managers have been covered in the previous section but of particular interest is the way in which managers perceive their self-identity to change when dealing with the various groups of people. Beth's experience when promoted within the same department is probably the most extreme. She worried about being seen as an imposter and how she was perceived by colleagues whom she still managed and, whilst this is understandable, there was a feeling amongst many of those interviewed that they had to have multiple identities according to who they were talking to.

This feeling of having multiple identities was held together, in the case of many managers, by their philosophical driver. The example of Dennis is an effective illustration of how the disparate identities can be drawn together via a central philosophy. As with many other middle managers, his philosophical driver centred around putting the student first in all situations, so he found no difficulty in reconciling his differing approaches to the various people he met. Hence, he refused to attend a meeting with senior managers as it would disadvantage students who would not be taught. Despite knowing that this decision would cause him problems with his line manager, he saw this as the right thing to do and this philosophical driver permeated each relationship he had. In many ways, Dennis (and indeed many others) wore their approach as a badge of honour. A number of interviewees talked about how they had worked hard to maintain their core values and although they recognised the fact that they had multiple identities, they made sure that their 'home' identity was not submerged by the others.

Finally, the human aspect of the job also influenced wider decisions middle managers made. Whilst it is tempting to suggest that the performative nature of the sector means that quantitative data is used to ensure that decisions are based on facts and figures, the research suggests that this is not the case.

Odile's experiences typify this. Although, unusually, she did take part in a full interview for her role, the main reason for accepting the job was the relationship she built up with Diane during the recruitment process. This

enabled her to feel part of the organisation but also helped mould her as a manager. Odile talked about the confidence that having a positive relationship with someone she worked closely with gave her and this came through in her post-interview thoughts:

The second thing that I thought about afterwards was that you said a couple of times that it depended on 'people'. I suppose you are right in a sense in that each of my experiences had a different line manager. I was just worried that by agreeing with this that I was too focussed on the notion of personality. I know I said that the positiveness of my first experience was partially down to the fact that I got on so well with Diane. But I got on with Tom (2nd LM) really well too. It was just that he applied this 'in at the deep end' approach and I struggled. So, Tom as a person was overtaken by the college's practice a bit. I do think it helps if you have a good rapport with your LM, but there's something about respecting the way they are that is more important.

That respect for others and the positive relationships that it engenders is something that was mentioned by other interviewees and is a key determinant in the success of the job.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

In the context of a sector that is facing both a reduction in funding and also the need to meet government priorities that are reviewed on an annual basis, the job of the middle manager in English post-compulsory education can be viewed as a significant challenge. What this research shows is that, despite the significant workload, the lack of resources and the performative culture that typifies further education at the moment, what has emerged is a vision of a group of people who are determined to do their best despite the challenges faced. In almost all cases, students were put at the forefront of decision making, even if this led to a negative consequence for the manager concerned, and each respondent had a clear philosophical driver that emerged during the interviews.

What is also clear is that there is no such thing as a 'typical' middle manager. The heterogeneity of middle managers is apparent throughout

the research, and attempts to generalise are difficult and often unwise. There are, however, a number of aspects that contribute to any description of middle managers and these fall into four 'dimensions'. These can be viewed in an illustrative approach (see Figure 4) but, in short, each dimension is the dimension managers inhabit when completing part of the job; different managers will have different strengths but all of the various dimensions need to be visited in order to ensure that the job is carried out effectively.

The philosophical driver of the manager informs everything they do and, in particular, drives the decisions that they are required to make. What is noticeable in many cases is that this base philosophy might well conflict with orders given by senior managers. This means that although elements of strategic compliance can be identified, the compliance is more likely to be linked to beliefs than pragmatism. These core values helped mould the manager through the transition period. Given that much of the transition was carried out in a manner that might be described as ad hoc, it is these core values that help create the moulded manager and helps to inform their self-identity during the transition.

The need to be resilient was a dimension that was viewed as vital for respondents. There was a near-universal acceptance that the transition and the experiences during this period that they went through prepared them for the rigours of the job. Whilst it is possible to argue that there might be a degree of cognitive dissonance about these responses, the fact that middle managers were happy to continue with their role and remarkably few regretted taking the role suggests that they generally feel as though they are achieving something and are able to put into action their plans.

Finally, the independent and human dimensions of managers were two key parts to this group. Although there was an element of cynicism in some answers when managers were asked about achieving KPIs, this should not be mistaken for a lack of commitment to the job or, in particular, the students. The middle managers interviewed, and the evidence from the questionnaire, suggests that they used human relationships, knowledge of the systems and their own personal belief structure to work towards achieving the best possible outcomes for the

students who were part of their department. This combination of approaches and strategies helped them when they stepped through the looking glass and made the transition to a middle manager role.





## **Chapter 8: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to draw the various themes discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 together and explore the issues that have emerged in the discussion. The links to the original research objectives will also be explored, as will the emerging good practice that has been identified and the contribution to knowledge. This will help us understand how the transition for middle managers takes place and how they can be supported to make this transition.

A reminder that the original research objectives were as follows:

- 1) To critically evaluate the challenges associated with the transitions lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to a managerial role.
- 2) To critically evaluate the impact of the training and support given by colleges of post-compulsory education on middle managers.
- 3) To critically evaluate different conceptualisations of 'professionalism' within a managerial, post-compulsory education context.
- 4) To identify good practice for colleges when selecting, training, supporting and evaluating managers.

### **8.2 The transition to the new role**

Taking the first objective, it is clear that there are a great number of challenges facing lecturers making the transition to the role of middle manager. These challenges may be divided into two categories, namely professional challenges (challenges of the job) and personal challenges (challenges for the person). The former appears rather easier to address than the latter, with evidence from the research suggesting that practice adopted in the sector rarely matches identified good practice from elsewhere. Courtney's (2015) view of the compulsory sector as being one where corporatisation of the job has meant that there is increased measurability, standardisation and structure could easily be a comment on

the further education sector in the post-incorporation period and is in stark contrast to much of the evidence collected in the study.

Taking Ecclestone's (2007) original point that a transition of this magnitude affects rather more than merely the working life of a lecturer, it is vital that due care is given for the upheavals experienced by new middle managers who are experiencing a change in self-identity due to the new role. This includes support for their work/life balance and also support for lecturers in their changing identity. The responses of interviewees suggest that the model suggested by Bush, Bell and Middlewood (2010), of a recruitment process that is rigorous and matches the demands of the job to the recruitment process, is rarely followed and this means that new middle managers are not always aware of the challenges that face them, nor supported through them. The experience of Jayne, who was interviewed in her lunch hour without even knowing that this was going to occur, represents an extreme example of the ad hoc nature of the process but she was not alone in experiencing a process that failed to prepare her for the challenges she would be faced with. The opposite extreme, the experience of Annalise, who, despite being an internal candidate and one who had been doing the job on a temporary basis, still had to go through a full recruitment process, actually proved a more successful model and gave her more credibility when starting the job. This contrasts with the battle Beth faced with her team when she was internally appointed with little formality in the recruitment process.

Given the fact that many transitions can be said to be iterative in nature (Biesta and Tedder, 2008), the approach adopted by many colleges neglects this and fails to predict the problems faced by new recruits. Whilst many managers, when looking back, view the abrupt move through the transition as good preparation for the role, it might be argued that this is due to their lack of experience of alternative approaches. Their frames of reference are such that they view this as normal (Sherif, 1936). Indeed, the one manager who had experienced a number of transitions between roles, Odile, was very clear about the benefits of being given adequate support.

The ad hoc nature of the process is mirrored elsewhere in the sector but its impact on their recruitment certainly provides a significant challenge to many middle managers during their transition. As has been stressed

previously, it is important to recognise the heterogeneity of the role and whilst it is unwise to provide generalisations, the initial time middle managers spend in the job can be seen as challenging as much of the recruitment process does not appear to prepare them for the role.

This ad hoc nature mirrors Jameson's (2013) description of a constantly evolving sector that needs to react to a host of stakeholders and needs to reinvent itself. The 'yes, but...and' description she uses reflects the changing nature of the sector and one that needs to move quickly in order to meet externally set targets and also one that is under increasing pressure from funding cuts (the latest figures show that employment in the sector has fallen by 3% in the last year, despite increasing numbers needing to continue in education post-16 (ETF, 2016). This approach can be seen in the recruitment process, with the importance of recruiting someone quickly uppermost in the minds of those planning the process. Returning to Courtney (2015), the drive for conformity and corporatisation might well have been a key tenet of the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) but the evidence is that this is not transferred to roles below Senior Management Teams. Out of all the managers interviewed, only three were recruited in a manner that could be described as modelling good practice (as defined by Torrington et al., 2011) whilst the others would fall into the category of ad hoc.

The three managers who were recruited in a formal manner – Annalise, Odile and Bob – shared a similar, positive career trajectory, which suggests that the approach that they were part of might have prepared them for the transition. All three are still in the sector and whilst Bob is still in the job for which he was recruited for, the other two have been promoted and left their previous job. In addition, their comments reinforced the importance of the recruitment process they went through. Firstly Annalise:

I am pleased I didn't just get appointed as it helped my credibility in that promoted role as I wasn't just there as I was the only one there.

Odile mirrored this view and stressed how the recruitment process allowed her to understand the culture of the organisation. Her first experience was a positive one and she mentions that as soon as the

interview was over, she felt comfortable within the organisation and was convinced that she would accept the job if offered it. Uniquely, Odile experienced the two extremes of the recruitment graph outlined in Chapter 5, as her next recruitment experience was far less positive (she was appointed in a very ad hoc manner without being fully informed about the job) and did not prepare her for the job. Her description of her first few days shows this:

There was no sense of a transition – the colleges view was that you had accepted the job so you got on with it. One of my most awful days was one of the first days. It was the 31st January and we had an audit. The project had been very badly managed and I was just discovering this.... I was sent into the auditor on my own and the auditor humiliated me as I had no answers, I had no support at all. In the end we got a negotiation with the auditors but I felt like a real failure and for 6 months I regretted taking the job.

Whilst it is important not to draw too many conclusions from this experience, what does come through is that the ad hoc nature of much of the recruitment does not appear to prepare lecturers for the transition. Much has been written about a paradigm shift (Randle and Brady, 1997) and the difficulties lecturers have in shifting from an educational to a managerial paradigm, and whilst it is clear that they do need to make decisions that cross between these two viewpoints (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013), the challenge of this particular transition appears to be rather less than the challenge of the practicalities of the job and how they are perceived. Returning to Bimrose and Brown (2010), the support for the transition which should help people from the start and at each stage (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) is often neglected, and middle managers learn that they need to fend for themselves rather than rely on structured, individualised support.

The debate initiated by the European Commission (2013) between ‘teacher competencies’ (which stressed the professionalism and indeed individualism of the lecturer) and ‘teaching competencies’ (which suggested that teaching was a craft-based profession that could be standardised) provides some clues to why this is the case. The shift that has occurred towards ‘teaching competencies’ (as outlined by Courtney,

2015) means that lecturers are becoming more used to following orders rather than embracing the democratic professionalism espoused by Sachs (2001). This means that when they make the transition to management, the challenge of adapting to an alternative paradigm that stresses the primary of the economic element and also is governed by multiple rules and regulations is rather less than the way in which it is perceived.

Busher and Harris (1999) identified 'bridging and brokering' and 'supervisory management' as key elements of the role, and both of these require the middle manager to ensure that procedures are followed but also that they are acknowledged in their role by their teams. Whilst the former appears to have become inculcated knowledge during their time as lecturers, it is the latter that is the main challenge, with the recruitment process being central to the perception of the manager. The contrast between the experiences of Annalise, Bob and Odile and that of Beth is stark. Whilst Annalise talked about the way in which she was accepted by her team, who had seen the process she had gone through to become the Head of Department, Beth was promoted internally in an ad hoc process and this caused problems with her team, who still viewed her in her previous role. This meant that whilst Annalise could focus on the requirements of the job, Beth (and others) had to 'win over' their teams rather than merely doing their job. This was exacerbated by the internal promotion element, which meant that others' perception of her, and the frames of reference in which they viewed her (Mezirow, 1997) were fixed from her previous role.

This perception of the new middle manager represented the key challenge identified in this research. Whilst it is comparatively easy for an organisation to put in place transitional arrangements that work, most notably in terms of a rigorous recruitment process and support for new managers (discussed later), a key challenge associated with the transitions lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to a managerial role relates to self-identity and how new managers are seen, and also how they see themselves. Felstead et al. (2010) describe how a group of fitness instructors were encouraged to develop a new persona and the same can be said of managers. Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010) highlight the psychological difficulties in making those changes (in effect, leaving a safe,

known identity for a new identity) and this is where support is often needed, according to the respondents.

The transition that new middle managers make can be linked to the theory of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003). The changes managers make are often transformative in nature (a key feature of Meyer and Land's definition) and sometimes they might be viewed as 'troublesome', in that they might go against previous norms that had been established as a lecturer. Interestingly, Meyer and Land (2003) also talk about the irreversibility of the changes, a feature supported by the research. Managers viewed the move from lecturing to managing as a one-way process.

Whilst the gaining of the threshold concepts of the role might seem like a comparatively straightforward process when supported within the organisation, this research supports previous research (Spenceley, 2007; Wallace, 2002) which highlights a lack of support in the sector. This causes a high degree of what might be termed 'liminality', whereby managers are trapped in a suspended state of partial understanding. New experiences overlay previous experiences, causing a lack of understanding and, in many cases, confusion:

Liminality is of course an ontological state, and must not therefore be confused with disaffection or disenchantment with a course, which can have numerous unconnected causes, and yet such disaffection is a likely correlate of being in an uncomfortable liminal state, with real-world consequences for students, staff and institutions.

(Atherton, Hadfield and Wolstencroft, 2012:2)

Whilst many would argue that any journey of this magnitude is complex and that there is no simple way of supporting people through (Cousin, 2006), there are ways of moving managers onwards from a preliminal state. Support and guidance can help, as can a clear understanding that any journey towards a postliminal state is not going to be a smooth transformation (Land, Meyer and Baillie, 2010). When questioning participants about their expectations of the job, few had a clear vision of what it entailed, and this meant that the intensity and difficulty came as a surprise, thus reinforcing their liminal state. Whilst it is important to note

that many talked about the demands of the job and how the ‘sink or swim’ start to the job helped them to cope with the demands of the role, the partial understanding of the role that defines a liminal state (Land, Meyer and Baillie, 2010) means that managers are not able to perform at their best, and this lack of understanding of – and, potentially, competence in – the role can have a damaging impact on self-identity. Whilst not the fragile learners Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) talk about, support through to the postliminal state might help new managers cope with challenges of the job.

Some managers did argue that the reverse was true: that the struggles they had at the start of the job actually prepared them for the rigours of the job. Festinger (1957) argues that cognitive dissonance can cause this sort of defence of an experience and this might well be the case here. Few managers were given any specific training and those who were reported that it was related to processes and procedures rather than dealing with a transition of self-identity. This meant that they had to go through the liminal state with no help and although the same expressions were used by interviewees (‘it was a baptism of fire’, ‘I had to hit the ground running’, ‘it was sink or swim’), the organisations appeared to fail to support this transition.

Whilst it is quite possible that those managers who survived the first few months of the job were then ‘ready’ for the challenges ahead, and bearing in mind that the sector (and indeed the managers) is certainly not homogeneous in nature, we do know that transitions often lead to profound change (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010) and that can impact on the self-identity of new managers. In addition, Bimrose and Brown (2010) look at the way in which a change in one part of an individual’s life can often affect other parts. This ‘butterfly effect’ (Lorenz, 1963) appears to be much underestimated by many organisations, yet its impact is stark in this research.

Participants talked about the way in which accepting the job affected all parts of their lives and given that the majority of effects appeared to be negative, most notably in greater stress levels, increased consumption of alcohol or prescription drugs and a deterioration of the work/life balance, it suggests that the impact on the individual of the transition should be



looked at when an appointment is made. The diverse nature of the managers inevitably means that the impact will be different on each manager but some core issues were mentioned by many managers. A lack of knowledge of the demands of the job led to increased stress, an increased workload did the same, the impact on those around them caught many managers by surprise and almost all spoke about a disconnect between what they expected from the job and the realities. This ensured that the transition through the liminal state proved problematic for many and the suggestion is that it could have been aided by the organisation if the needs of the individual had been looked at and an individualised plan of action put in place.

Managers also talked about the various facets that influenced their approach; although their approaches were disparate, they all had a set of core values. Reay (2004) discussed the way in which someone's core habits and identity could be captured and whilst on the surface it proved relatively straightforward to capture the 'what' part of the job – in other words, the practicalities – the 'where' had an influence on this. Reay (2004) talks about changes that occur when going through transitions and many managers talked about their anchor principles, which supported them in the process and in decision making. The enigmatic nature of this (Maton, 2008), as well as the disparate nature of the group, makes it very difficult to generalise but it is clear that managers' philosophical beliefs are at the centre of much of their decision making and helped them through the liminal state.

The two key actions here – a review of the recruitment process for new middle managers and support for the successful applicants in achieving a postliminal state – are likely to help them meet the challenges of a new role and also enable them to cope with the change in self-identity that tends to accompany any change in role.

### **8.3 Training and supporting middle managers**

Leading on from the discussion on the transition and recruitment of middle managers, it is important to look at the next phase of their journey – what happens when they have been appointed. Historically, training

opportunities for middle managers within the sector have been limited (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013), a situation that is in stark contrast to the support offered to senior managers (BIS, 2007). This leads to middle managers feeling unsupported and undervalued (Briggs, 2001). Within compulsory education, this situation was recognised by the Labour administration of 1997 under the 'Leading from the Middle' programme. This was set up in order to give new middle managers the support and the skills necessary to make the transition from their previous role and was part of a wider drive to improve leadership within education. After this programme ended, alternatives were put in place in order to give middle leaders within the compulsory phases a certified course for the role. The current version – the National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership (NPQML) – was set up in 2014 and consists of modules that aim to examine how middle managers can improve the quality of teaching within their setting but also how to analyse performance data and model outstanding teaching (National College for Teaching and Leadership, NCTL, 2014), all skills that have been identified as crucial within the target-driven environment that pervades education. Within the post-compulsory sector, however, there is no nationally recognised, equivalent qualification and this has led to an ad hoc approach from colleges that often fails to adequately support new middle managers.

Within the private sector, it is often the case that a full programme of support and training is available. Yukl (2002) identifies a number of strategies that are used to ensure that support for new roles is provided, with 'succession planning' and 'career management' approaches used extensively. For the majority of managers interviewed, this appears not to have occurred, with support being offered only after the job has been accepted. This resulted in training and support being seen as reactive rather than proactive, with managers being left to 'sink or swim' in many cases. When training was offered, it focused almost exclusively on systems and processes rather than the 'softer' skills needed for managers. This meant that managers were able to identify how to achieve the KPIs but expressed frustration at their inability to deal with staffing problems that occurred. Given that this represents a significant part of the job of a middle manager (Busher and Harris, 1999), this represents a major flaw in the support available for middle managers. Very few respondents

interviewed had been offered generic management training programmes such as the Certificate in Management Studies (CMS), which would help them understand the role and develop the skills necessary to successfully execute the role. Linking this to the previous discussion regarding transition, it is clear that the transition is not being managed proactively. Given that much of the transition is predictable (Bimrose and Brown, 2010), this shows a lack of planning that could be addressed.

One way identified by many respondents as a method of support was the appointment of a mentor. This approach, long established within initial teacher education, has been used successfully in industry to support new employees. Out of all respondents, 78% had not been allocated a mentor; however, those who had received this support often spoke highly of it. The caveat to this is that the mentor appointed was often someone who had proved successful within the organisation; whilst this might appear to be of benefit, the problem was the lack of time they had available. A typical quote from the questionnaire sums this up:

My mentor is brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable and someone who I would aspire to be like. The problem is that they are so busy that I only get to see them about once every two weeks for a quick coffee.

Whilst acknowledging the problems of providing an individualised training programme and mentor for all new managers, those organisations that did provide that were viewed in a far more positive light than the ones that provided little or no training (this amounted to over 50% of organisations represented). Clifford and Thorpe (2007) suggest that it is important to have a tailored support programme, and the evidence suggests that the human aspect of the support is viewed as the most valuable part of the training.

Odile is a good example of how the human relationship can affect success or otherwise within a job. This quote recalls her reaction after returning from an interview at a general FE college:

I remember the moment when I walked up to my front door and said to myself, it was almost out loud 'I will take the job if I get the Deputy job and 'Diane' gets the Head' later that day the Principal

phoned and offered me the deputy job, so I asked who got the head job and she said 'Diane' and I thought this was almost like fate.

I felt really comfortable in the college environment and with the Principal who I found out was new and I just found that working with 'Diane' would be a fantastic start to a managerial career.

This linking to human relationships enabled Odile to feel supported and motivated to start on what would inevitably prove to be a difficult job.

A more typical example comes from Judy who, like the vast majority of managers interviewed, was keen to 'make a difference' when she first started the job. Her first experience of support, though, was not a positive one:

I think it would have been useful, once they knew my predecessor was going, to have had more time to sit alongside her and learn the job as she was doing it rather than having to pick it up once she was gone. Although having said that, as her promotion was within the college I could in theory have gone to her and asked her what she did about that such and such. In practice, she wasn't there when I needed her or they were things that had to be decided immediately so trial and error played a big part.

I think...My predecessor had to fall into her post at very short notice so generally within the college things are left until the last minute until a replacement member of staff is in post.

This lack of support is something that is mirrored by many interviewees and there is a clear feeling of a lack of forward planning.

The concept of succession planning and support for new managers in their transition period in the organisation is a well-established one within business (Yukl, 2002; Cuban, 1988), yet it is clear that few post-compulsory organisations provide this for new managers. Rothwell (2010) talks about three interlinking strategies that can be used to support new managers: succession planning, talent management and the wider concept of workforce planning. Given the evidence presented so far, it is clear that workforce planning is not something that many colleges use. Jayne's example of being interviewed in her lunch break might be an extreme

version but it is not the only example found. As stated earlier, only three interviewees went through a formalised recruitment process and although it may be argued that this does not prove a lack of workforce planning (and indeed some of the appointees were successful at their job), given their collective comments about having to ‘sink or swim’, their success might well be despite the process rather than because of it.

Defining succession planning is difficult but the most commonly used definition suggests the following:

[It is] the process that helps stabilise the tenure of personnel...it is understood as an effort designed to ensure the continued effective performance of an organisation, division, department or work group by providing for the development, replacement and strategic application of key people over time.

(Rothwell, 2010:6).

Given the current turbulence of the sector, this would seem to be crucial; however, despite the middle manager role being seen as vital to the success of the organisation (Briggs, 2006), transitory arrangements appeared to be minimal. There is evidence of a crude form of talent management within organisations but this tends to be defined as a ‘tap on the shoulder and a suggestion that someone apply for a job’ rather than a formalised process. Belinda’s experience of ‘being on the radar’ was typical. Those around her spoke of her drive, energy and competence and it was clear that she was someone who would be well suited to middle management. Despite this, however, the process still seems flawed.

Given that Belinda would be someone for whom a talent management programme would be a good opportunity and that the support and training built into this programme would be helpful, it is important to analyse her interview in light of the knowledge that a smooth transition period and the linked succession planning can ensure that the new manager can feel supported, trained and valued by the organisation (Rothwell, 2010). Belinda started off by talking about her current training, a course that was benefiting her and proving useful in identifying both strengths and weaknesses within her department:

I have an NVQ 4 in Management and I am currently doing the Level 5. I am halfway through [clarification – the taught version]. It is hard, it is very interesting and I am learning a lot and I am seeing a lot of things that I say ‘oh that makes sense’ and I am having lots of penny dropped moments! Lots of things, I am also seeing lots of...you get taught the good things and the good practice and you then compare it to here and I am seeing gaps which is frustrating.

The frustration for Belinda was that this was offered after 18 months in the job rather than when she started (or, ideally, before). The reasons why become clearer when looking further at her transcript. Looking again at the way in which she was recruited, it is interesting to note the ad hoc nature of the recruitment but also the way in which she was identified as a ‘talent’ but nothing was done to prepare her for the role.

The recruitment process was a formality as it was clear that she was the chosen candidate but that again raises questions about why support and training were not available from the start, especially given the start Belinda experienced, which consisted of having to deal with uncooperative line managers, reduce the number of staff within the department, close courses and solve a number of entrenched staffing problems.

Interestingly, although from an outside perspective it seems obvious that the support she received had not prepared her for the role, Belinda refused to accept this interpretation. When challenged about this, she responded robustly: ‘It is exactly what I thought it would be. I knew the first year would be really tough, really challenging, really hard going’.

Whilst there might be elements of the cognitive dissonance discussed earlier, it also reflects the need for resilience that so many managers talked about. Belinda’s answers reflect her assumption that what she went through in terms of a lack of support (and the lateness of her generic management training) was viewed by her as ‘normal’. The literature and the experience of others suggests otherwise.

Some respondents mentioned peers as a valued source of support within the job but it is interesting to note that the response of senior managers to any attempt by middle managers to support each other was

overwhelmingly negative. Beth, who was promoted internally and given little support in her new role by the organisation as a whole, was typical. When confronted by a lack of support (most notably for the softer management skills needed to be a success in the role), the middle managers sought to support each other:

We should have had a management training programme and/or units or additional mentoring support from our line managers. The college when I was appointed was being restructured so out of 12 operational managers, probably 5 or 6 of us were brand news and...we had support but it wasn't focused and it wasn't developmental, there was no coaching or mentoring so we pretty much found our way on our own. We pretty much supported each other and there was far more peer support than management support for us.

This peer support proved invaluable when discussing issues such as staffing or strategies to ensure that the requests of the senior management team were conveyed in a positive manner to the departmental lecturers. The description reflects Busher and Harris's (1999) 'bridging and brokering' role. Given the vacuum provided by the lack of institutional support that was available, middle managers put in place informal support:

It was quite informal. We did actually at one point ask for a more formal support mechanism but that was overturned by the college in question as it thought that it might be contrary to what the college was trying to achieve...They did then say that they would support us a little more but that never really materialised.

The view that this mechanism might be 'contrary to what the college was trying to achieve' is an interesting one and suggests a worry that the middle managers, if collectivised, would not necessarily go in the same direction as that envisaged, yet the problem is that, without support from higher levels, this is far more likely to happen. The majority of managers spoke highly of peer support and when it was organised, it appeared to be of benefit to the organisation as it allowed the middle leaders to have a say and to 'buy in' to the goals of the organisation.

The one dimension of support and training within the organisation that was used extensively was support and training in systems and processes. Almost all interviewees mentioned this and the list contained a large number of processes, including financial, timetabling, target setting, ordering, budgeting and human resource managing. The common feature about all of this training was that it was instrumental in nature. In effect, there was a clear goal for the training and that was to ensure conformity between departments and to facilitate the smooth running of the systems within the organisation. Whilst these training courses were generally welcomed by managers, who viewed them as useful for their jobs, what they did not do was provide support for the manager, rather than support for the manager's job. As has been mentioned, it was often the emotional and 'softer skills' part of the job that new managers struggled most with and this was not covered in these courses. It is also important to note that the timing of the courses was often viewed as ad hoc. Now, in some ways, this was inevitable – the heterogeneous nature of the role means that a bespoke programme would often work best – but the contrast was the programmes were often seen as reactive to crises rather than a proactive support for new systems being introduced.

Although the quality of specific nature of the training and support that was offered to middle managers was criticised by almost all participants, the initial research objective looked at how well it prepared participants for the rigours of the role. This links to both the ambiguity that they faced (Murphy and Curtis, 2013), the specifics of the role (as defined by Busher and Harris, 1999) but also the culture that they would become part of. Peters and Waterman's (1982) vision of 'simultaneous loose/tight properties' stresses the importance of the manager being aware of the culture and hence framing all of their decisions within it. Despite the perception from outside that the training fails to prepare managers for the rigours of the role and that the support offered is generally lacking in formality, the majority of managers interviewed did not see this as a barrier to success; indeed, as with Belinda, many were positive about their initial experiences, with praise given for the fact that they were able to become prepared for the role and were 'resilient'.



#### **8.4 Framing professionalism in the sector**

Given the fluid nature of the sector, defining and framing the concept of professionalism within the sector has become increasingly difficult, and whilst analysing the responses given, it was clear that there was a wide disparity of approaches to professionalism.

Writing about the compulsory sector, and in particular about the academisation programme, Courtney (2015) talks about how professionalism has been subsumed by the need for managers to be corporate actors. Within this study, there is some evidence to suggest that the needs of the organisation within further education were paramount to managers and that they viewed professionalism through an external lens. A minority of managers talked about professionalism in terms that linked the concept to that of being 'outstanding' at Ofsted. The language that was used suggested that the inculcated knowledge gained was that to be a professional equated to ensuring that you fitted the criteria of the common inspection framework. The assumption was that professionalism could be defined and codified, an approach that has been criticised (Lingfield, 2012).

Samantha's words illustrate this. A career navigator (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013), when asked about what it meant to be a professional within the sector, her answer matched the language of Ofsted:

My motivation is just to do well and I want to do well and I want my department to do well and I want to be seen as someone who is outstanding. For me if I wasn't Grade 1 then I would want to know about why it wasn't and what I had to do.

The link with self-identity is clear here but it is also the linking of professionalism to an inspection framework that is interesting. Samantha was not the only manager to do this and indeed even managers who have taken a very different approach to their careers appeared to be influenced in this way. Hubert, the very student-focused manager from Chapter 6, was talked about as a non-conformist by many of his peers and yet when asked about the concept of professionalism, his answer started with his normal rhetoric about the importance of the student but then acknowledged the external influences colleges are faced with: 'To make

sure that the needs of the students are met, to give students a positive experience and to ensure that the college meets its data targets’.

The linking of professionalism to external targets was something that was brought up in the Lingfield report (2012). In it, Lingfield talked about how professionalism should not be something that is imposed; instead, it should come from within. His argument, that merely enforcing the need for a qualification does not make someone professional, appears to be at odds with the visions expressed in the two preceding quotes that quantify professionalism.

This argument can be linked to the European Commission (2013) report that looked at teacher competencies and teaching competencies. The established approach within education – that of ‘professional judgement’ being used and the professionalism of the lecturer being linked to the ideals discussed by Sachs (2001) – appears not to be the dominant model in the dimensions represented by the managers interviewed. Whilst professionalism has always been viewed as a rather nebulous concept and indeed the work of Orr and Simmons (2010) suggests that a dual professionalism approach might be used, there appears to be little of the democratic professionalism that Sachs (2001) talked about. Only Max, who worked with very disadvantaged students and had a very clear philosophy, appeared to disregard the external forces, instead focusing on the needs of the students to the exclusion of all else. The rest of the managers talked about an approach that was similar to the teaching competency model that the European Commission (2013) suggested.

Managers such as Samantha and Hubert talked about the need to meet targets and ensure KPIs were achieved and the importance attached to external bodies such as Ofsted. This shifted the focus of professionalism away from the individual lecturer towards a wider stressing of the primacy of the goals of the organisation. This mirrored Courtney’s (2015) corporatised approach and it also could be linked to the decline in popularity of the ‘communities of practice’ approach (Wenger, 1999). The replacement of a ‘communities of practice’ approach with a more corporatised view of the role of the lecturer (and indeed manager) has been mirrored by a shift in emphasis in the roles adopted by middle managers. The supervisory role (Busher and Harris, 1999) appears to be

the dominant role, with managers talking at length about the way in which they had to 'manage' their staff to ensure that they conformed.

A previous quote from Belinda typifies many of the responses to questions regarding their role and how that related to professionalism:

I play by the book and I wouldn't let someone do something that either I couldn't explain to my boss, the HR manager or the Principal with a good rationale or that I can't apply to everybody.

This stressing of conformity was not uncommon amongst many managers; whereas the idea of teacher competencies remains a vague and very individual approach to professionalism, this approach appears to codify professionalism in a way that suggests that there is one way of doing things and that way needs to be enforced by the manager. Whilst it might be overstating the case to suggest that this mirrors the strict demarcation of jobs and rigorously enforced view of the job that was observed by Beynon (1975), it does suggest that the compliance culture noted by Silverman (2008) is still prevalent within the sector.

Lying beside the issue of conformity is the fact that many managers brought with them the 'baggage' of previous experience. This should not always be seen through a negative lens, as the sector has plenty to learn from other parts of the public and private sector.

Annalise, who moved from the retail sector to the NHS and then on to education, outlined the advantages of being an outsider when interviewed:

Because my background was the private sector, and coming into the Health Service, you do view things very differently. Performance related pay is not unusual in the private sector but a lot of people in the Health Service, like in education, have incremental pay rises so it was automatically done and the idea that their progression could be prevented by not reaching a level of competence was quite a shocking thing for people who had been in the health service for 20 or 25 years whereas for new recruits to the Health Service, it wouldn't have an impact on as they would understand that actually this is the process. I guess it is like anything, if you are changing over then you have to understand that there will be resistance to change.

She then went on to outline how she was able to change things in her area using previous knowledge and a previous understanding of what was meant to be a 'professional'. In effect, this meant that she put the needs of the individual student at the heart of everything and instead of conforming without question, she ensured that the decisions she made fitted with her philosophical approach to the job that had been developed in her previous positions.

The approach that Annalise took illustrates that professionalism was a broad and certainly not a heterogeneous concept amongst participants. As Lingfield (2012) intimated, to try to define it is problematic and, it could be argued, undermining. It is also complicated by the previous experiences of managers and also the fact that dual professionalism (Orr and Simmons, 2010) ensures that many people within the sector have loyalties that are split between (at least) two groups. A closing example comes from Max, the maverick manager who talked openly about the conflict between his values, the needs of the students and the requests from senior managers. His approach was to remain true to his values and to help students but to try to ensure that requests that came from senior managers that aligned to these values were taken into account.

Although his image was one of a rebel, this approach was replicated by many participants and suggests that the idea of a compliant sector is rather too simplistic. On the surface, participants were skilled in talking the language of compliance and performativity (Ball, 2003) but looking at their actions, there was a rather less obvious picture. Professionalism appeared to be a stronger concept when it came from within managers rather than being imposed through structures and the insistence on compliance. Returning to a theme from Chapter 6, extreme compliers are likely to accept and embrace instructions on professionalism; however, the majority of managers do not fall into this category and so a homogenised approach is unhelpful and unlikely to work. Managers bring in their philosophical approach, their previous experiences and even their view of the instructions given when deciding on a course of action and so, as with Lingfield's (2012) recommendations, to attempt to define how to be a professional appears only to be relevant to a small percentage of respondents.

## **8.5 Modelling excellence in the sector**

When analysing responses, it is sometimes easy to focus on the negative and identify areas for improvement; however, it is clear that there are plenty of examples of good practice within the sector.

Although the majority of recruitment that takes place could fairly be described as ad hoc, there are a number of examples that reflect the good practice described by Foot and Hook (2008). Annalise's experience of being interviewed in a rigorous and fair manner is a good example of how good recruitment can influence the success of a manager once in post. The rest of her team could see that she had been appointed as the best candidate rather than merely being appointed thanks to a 'tap on the shoulder' and this gave her credibility within the job role. The contrast to Beth is stark. Despite being a very competent manager who was likely to have successfully been appointed to the job whatever form the interview took, she was not accepted by her team due to the fact that she was promoted from within and appointed with only scant regard to the established norms of interviewing. The other extreme example noted, that of Jayne, also illustrates this. Having been appointed via a lunchtime interview that she was not aware was an interview until it had started, she struggled to gain the support of her team, who failed to view her as a credible manager due to the circumstances of her appointment.

The good practice identified relates to ensuring that the person wants the job as much as the job wants the person. The 'tap on the shoulder' described by many participants appears to work as a one-way method of communication. Managers are chosen by senior leaders and often accept the job without necessarily knowing what they are accepting. By ensuring that a full recruitment procedure is followed, colleges are likely to have greater staff retention as well as managers who have far more initial credibility.

The experiences of Odile during her first job within further education also illustrate good practice in the recruitment, training and support of middle managers. Odile talked at length about the importance of human relationships within a job and stressed how she originally took the job due to the connection she felt with the senior person – Diane. This view was echoed by many participants and it is clear that the job becomes a more

straightforward proposition when some form of human support is offered. Odile was supported by Diane and there were other examples of this.

Rather than embracing the concept of support, some colleges actively looked to remove this. Beth talked about how attempts to form a middle manager support group were blocked by her college, and this was repeated in other colleges. These gatherings were seen as being a direct challenge to the senior managers rather than a support group. Busher and Harris's (1999) view that one of the major roles of the middle manager is 'bridging and brokering' suggests that communicating with managers above and lecturers below is a key part of the role. Although each department is likely to have its own challenges, the sharing of good practice that occurs during these meetings helps to ensure that mistakes are not repeated across the organisation.

Given that this research suggests that middle managers generally have a strong philosophical approach to their job, it seems unlikely that a support group would do anything other than offer the new middle manager a forum in which they could share problems and actively engage with solutions. Using Schramm's (1955) model of communication, the purpose of these meetings appears to be generally to ensure that 'noise' (Schramm, 1955) is minimised.

There were many other examples of good practice identified and many will be discussed in the conclusions and recommendations. What is clear, however, is that although workload is a major issue for most managers, it is the way in which managers approach the significant workload that determines whether it becomes a major problem.

Many respondents talked about the significant workload but what was noticeable was the way in which this was handled by each person. Bob talked about how he made sure that Sundays were always left free and how he ensured that they were never used for any work. This approach worked well for him, although other managers had alternative strategies for ensuring that the stress of the workload did not impinge on their life away from the organisation. Max, the resisting manager, used to run as a way of relieving the stresses of the day, whilst Belinda ensured that the support she received from her family helped to balance the workload. What comes through is that although the actual strategy differs from person to person,

the managers who are most successful in balancing their workload with the other parts of their life are those who have thought about what works for them and have a clearly defined strategy for dealing with the workload.

In some cases, the organisation has helped this process. A handover period proved beneficial for many new managers. Judy, the veteran manager of the Childcare department, mentioned that contact with her predecessor, however brief, was of great benefit and enabled her to fully understand the demands of the role. Some organisations avoid this approach, believing that the outgoing manager is either going to be unhappy (if they have been replaced) or aware of shortcuts (if they are moving of their own volition); either way, the organisation is not keen for the new manager to meet the old one in case these characteristics are passed on.

## **8.6 Revisiting the Research Objectives**

The original purpose of this research was to address four specific objectives; the purpose of this section is to briefly summarise how each has been addressed:

- 1) *To critically evaluate the challenges associated with the transitions lecturers face when moving from their teaching role to a managerial role.*

The challenges faced by middle managers have been detailed through the words of those involved and it is clear that the job is both demanding and complex. The key contribution to knowledge within this research has been to identify the philosophical driver as the most important driver for decision making for middle managers and for ensuring that they can make the transition to the new role. This represents a change from previous research (Gleeson and Shain, 1999), which suggested that middle managers were often driven by more pragmatic concerns. This driver represents the lens which we can use to understand what guides managers through both transitions and also decision making.

- 2) *To critically evaluate the impact of the training and support given by colleges of post-compulsory education on middle managers.*

Interestingly, the primary influence on the driver is not necessarily the training and support that new managers received on commencement of the job. The interviews made it clear that two managers, working in the same organisation, might well have very different perceptions of and approaches to the job, which suggests that any training and support has only a partial influence on what drives the manager. In addition to this, previous research (Briggs, 2006; Dennis and Walker, 2016) created typologies of managers which, whilst useful, didn't capture the nuances of the role. Instead, the concept of 'dimensions' has been used to describe the various facets of the role. The difference from previous research is that the role is not viewed as static: whilst managers might well have a preferred dimension, they are not limited to that; indeed, part of the remit of the job is to be able to cross to each dimension. This means that the traditional training used within colleges is of limited use for managers other than familiarising them with systems and processes.

3) *To critically evaluate different conceptualisations of 'professionalism' within management in a post-compulsory education context.*

The driver of the manager explains much of what they do and represents a rather different model to the traditional description of 'professionalism', which stresses a collective definition. This research suggests that professionalism and, by extension, 'doing the right thing' differs according to the individual manager and that there can be no one, collective definition of the term. Whilst there are broad similarities in some cases (for example, the importance of ensuring the students are put first, the understanding that KPIs should be met), the nature of the philosophical driver means that the concept shifts according to the dimension the manager is occupying. Hence, the conclusion is that professionalism was a very individual concept.

In addition to this conclusion, this research has also identified a difference between the shared understanding of the environment, which has been termed 'management', and the individual person carrying out the role, who has been termed 'the manager'. This distinction helps us understand the heterogeneous nature of the job, but also helps us to understand the wider context.



- 4) *To identify good practice for colleges when selecting, training, supporting and evaluating managers.*

Despite some of the stories told during the interviews, there are still a great many examples of good practice within the sector. The majority of managers were able to recount examples of good practice that could be disseminated to the sector as a whole. Many of the best examples of good practice related to the support given to new managers; where this worked, it was viewed as highly beneficial to those starting their managerial careers.

## **8.7 Recommendations**

Whilst the heterogeneity of the sector, and indeed the middle managers within it, has been established, it is nonetheless possible to identify a number of areas of good practice for organisations and also to identify areas where new managers might well need support when making the transition from lecturer to manager.

### **8.7.1 Recruitment**

The first recommendation concerns the recruitment of new staff. This research has found that, in the majority of cases, good practice has not been followed and there has been a perception that the final decision when recruited had been made before any interviews had taken place. This caused resentment amongst some staff and it also made the newly appointed manager's job rather more difficult as they had to fight this perception. Some managers also spoke about the fact that they felt unprepared for the role and that they would have liked far more information about what the role entailed before they started. This was especially true when looking at the impact the role had on their lives outside the organisation.

For organisations, the most important point is to ensure that the person wants the job as much as the job wants the person. This means that recruitment decisions should not be predetermined; instead, they should be open and transparent to members of the team. This will ensure that

when the successful candidate is appointed, the other team members' perception will be that the final result was a fair reflection of who was the best candidate.

In addition to this, it remains vital to ensure that applicants have a clearer understanding of what the job entails rather than a romanticised version. Previous research (Thompson and Wolstencroft, 2013) has looked at the impact an inaccurate initial perception can have on the new manager, and this remains a key task for the organisation. In addition, it is important to ensure that managers know that the job might well impact on life outside the organisation.

### **8.7.2 Support**

The majority of middle managers were not allocated a mentor, and of those who were, many experienced problems over access to them. This meant that, in many cases, middle managers felt unsupported and had to find out information on procedures and good practice for themselves. Whilst this did ensure that they developed a degree of resilience, it also meant that managers felt unsupported and also were unable to operate efficiently at the start of their job. The training and support given generally focused on processes and systems and, whilst useful, did not address 'softer' aspects of the job. This is consistent with previous work (Spenceley, 2007; Briggs, 2007). There was considerable resistance to setting up support groups for middle managers in which they could get together and support their peers, despite evidence from those colleges that had such a scheme that it proved beneficial to both the organisation and the managers.

In the vast majority of cases, middle managers were not asked about the support that they would like to have in place. Whilst it might be difficult for managers to understand the support they need before they are in place, it would still give a general understanding of the needs of this group – and help their development (Crawley, 2015). Surveying those who have gone through the transition and asking new managers on a regular basis might well prove to be beneficial.

### **8.7.3 Work/life balance**

The workload for middle managers within the sector is significant, with all managers surveyed working long hours and viewing this as the norm. The majority of managers accepted this as being part of the job, with managers explaining the pressures and the strategies they used to cope with the workload.

Whilst there was an acceptance of the workload, the strategies used to deal with this were often unhealthy and failed to address the issue of work/life balance. In relatively few instances were new middle managers advised about how to deal with the workload and hence they used their own strategies. This meant that they often repeated mistakes made elsewhere before they decided on a solution that worked for them.

Organisations need to give advice to managers about strategies to enable them to balance the twin demands of work and home. This might be done via more experienced middle managers or a survey of workloads. Ensuring that all managers are able to establish a satisfactory work/life balance is key to ensuring that managers do not become resentful of the organisation and the job.

### **8.7.4 A narrow focus**

Almost all of those surveyed had a very narrow focus within the organisation. The fact that KPIs were stressed meant that the middle managers were inward-facing in their outlook and were constantly looking within their department rather than having a wider perspective. Whilst there are benefits to this and, almost without exception, managers were keen to stress how important it was that their department did well, it did mean that a wider, organisational perspective was missing. This meant that opportunities were missed for looking at alternative perspectives and ways of doing things.

The sharing of good practice between departments might well help the organisation as a whole and also encourage managers to work together. It would also ensure that managers would be more likely to be aware when things are not 'right'. A wider perspective (perhaps even embracing visits

outside the organisation) is likely to generate new ideas and fresh approaches.

#### **8.7.5 Enhancing Status and Credibility**

The middle managers who took part in this research were generally positive about both their roles and also the importance of the sector. This is something that is not always recognised within the literature (or within their own organisations) and, if recognised, could help both their own self-identity and also the way in which they were perceived. The majority no longer taught, instead focusing on the managerial aspects within the department. This meant that they were perceived to have lost contact with the students, so it was easier for members of their department to dismiss their views on teaching and learning. By teaching (even if it is only a minimal amount), this issue is likely to disappear so the recommendation is that middle managers should carry out some teaching.

In addition to this, few managers had a formal qualification. This meant that they, again, lacked support but also that they were not given the acknowledgement that other professions have given to them with a formal qualification. Completing a formal qualification could help to enhance the status and credibility of managers.

### **8.8 Further study**

As with any research, there are areas that would benefit from further study. Whilst this work stresses the importance of not generalising the role, it would be interesting and useful to further investigate good practice in the sector. The research identified a lot of examples of where ad hoc processes have been used, in particular in recruitment, and although many managers spoke about the resilience that these procedures engendered in them, there are some good examples of where new managers have been supported from the very start of the recruitment process and these could be shared across the sector and identified as best practice.

In addition to this, it would be interesting to compare the role of the middle manager in post-compulsory education with a similar role outside

the sector. The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) made specific mention of using best practice from the private sector within post-compulsory education and 25 years after incorporation, this would be a good area to investigate to see whether the reality has matched the rhetoric.

In terms of methodology future studies could take differing approaches. Within this research the voices of those in middle management positions have been very powerful and a biographical interview method would allow for an alternative way of capturing the voices of those within the sector. Alternatively a case study approach could work well in researching the area.

One final area that would also be an interesting future study is to look at cross-cultural comparisons. This could identify any differences and indeed what similarities exist.

## **8.9 Concluding thoughts – my journey**

When I started this doctoral thesis, I was full of certainties. In hindsight, these were strongly influenced by my own experience as a middle manager in the sector and at the start of the research, I subconsciously made the assumption that my experience was ‘typical’. The reality was rather different and by the end of the interviewing process, the initial certainties had given way to the belief that the role of the middle manager was a very individual. Although we could draw together a few generalisations, everyone’s perception was different.

Whilst the step from certainty to uncertainty might seem a backward one, especially as part of the reason for starting this thesis was a desire to make recommendations to improve the experience of my successors, in reality it has been liberating. Although the conditions and the experiences of the managers I have met have often been negative, most were able to identify solutions to the problems faced and most the student at the centre of things. For the participants, their role was more than just a job and what I have gained from this research is a clearer understanding of the human side of what middle managers do.

The desire to help was one of the reasons why I came into the sector, and to see these core values were shared with many participants. Indeed, the certainty I had when I started about managers feeling downtrodden and part of a sector that was under constant attack gave way to an understanding that everyone saw their role, their organisation and their purpose in a different way. Korzybski (1933) warns that the map must not be confused with the territory and this was a key learning point for me. Everyone viewed their role differently and the concept of a universal truth was a notion that did not exist in the sector, a point I realised as the interviews progressed.

Despite the uncertainty that characterised much of the latter part of the research, the learning journey I have undertaken has been a positive one. The experiences of middle managers and their reactions to the problems faced might not always have been positive but the individual stories of battling against systems and processes are an indication of the way in which managers are fighting to maintain their values and help students.



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## **Appendix 1:** Breakdown of Interviewees

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Middle management experience</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Allison	General FE college	41-50	East Midlands	5 years +	After a successful career in the college, Allison now works within the HE sector.
Angie	General FE college	41-50	East Midlands	0-1 years	Angie has worked in the same college since she started her career in the sector.
Annalise	NHS / FE college	41-50	East Midlands	5 years +	Annalise worked as a senior manager in the NHS before transferring to the post-compulsory education sector.
Barbara	Sixth form college	31-40	North East	3-4 years	Barbara was one of the few managers to talk about a career plan.
Belinda	Sixth form college	31-40	South West	3-4 years	Belinda was promoted to a senior managerial position shortly after the interview.
Beth	General FE college	41-50	East Midlands	5 years +	After being promoted internally, Beth decided to move to another college where she was not known.
Bob	Sixth form college	51-60	Yorkshire	5 years +	An experienced manager, Bob brought experience from the compulsory sector.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Middle management experience</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Dave	General FE college	51-60	West Midlands	5 years +	Dave talked about two spells as a middle manager during the interview.
Dennis	General FE college	51-60	East Midlands	1-2 years	Dennis was promoted to a middle managerial position right at the end of his teaching career.
Hubert	Sixth form college	51-60	Greater London	5 years +	Hubert was one of the few middle managers interviewed who still had a substantial teaching timetable.
Jayne	General FE college	41-50	North Midlands	5 years +	After starting in the compulsory sector, Jayne has now left the FE sector and works in HE.
Judy	General FE college	51-60	South West	5 years +	Judy had worked as a middle manager for over 10 years.
Kerri-Anne	General FE college	51-60	East Midlands	3-4 years	As well as working in the UK post-compulsory sector, Kerri-Anne has also worked in the US education system.
Laura	Land-based college	41-50	South West	3-4 years	Laura had worked in the private sector before moving to the post-compulsory sector.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Age group</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Middle management experience</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Max	General FE college	31-40	North Midlands	1-2 years	Max works with disadvantaged students.
Nichola	Land-based college	31-40	South West	1-2 years	Nichola was strident in her insistence that she continued to teach.
Odile	General FE college	51-60	Greater London	5 years +	After working as a middle manager at three colleges in 5 years, Odile has now left the sector and works within HE
Samantha	General FE college	31-40	East Midlands	3-4 years	Samantha talked about middle management as a stepping stone in her career.
Stella	General FE college	31-40	South West	3-4 years	Stella was promoted to a middle managerial position soon after being appointed as a lecturer
Tony	General FE college	51-60	West Midlands	5 years +	Tony was a student at the same college where he was later appointed a lecturer and then middle manager.

## **Appendix 2: Questionnaire**



*A critical analysis of the transition from lecturer to middle manager within the Post-Compulsory education sector*

### **Questionnaire**

I am currently studying for a PhD at the University of Warwick. As part of my studies I am investigating the recruitment, support and training of managers within further education and would be grateful if you could complete the survey below. All information will be anonymous and will be kept in a password protected file.

If you have any questions please contact me via email: [P.J.W.Wolstencroft@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:P.J.W.Wolstencroft@warwick.ac.uk)

#### **Demographic Information**

1 What is your gender?

Male		Female	
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2 What is your age?

21-30		31-40		41-50		51-60		61+	
Prefer not to say									

3 In which region is your main place of work?

East Midlands	
East of England	
Greater London	
North East	
North West	
South East	
South West	
West Midlands	
Yorkshire and Humber	
Not known/Prefer not to say	

- 3b Please tick the type of organisation that you view as your main place of work

General FE College	
Sixth Form College	
Land Based College	
Specialist College	
Other	

**Role within the organisation**

- 4 What is your current job role?

Principal	
Other Senior Manager	
Middle Manager (Curriculum)	
Middle Manager (Support staff)	
First Line Manager	
Other (please state)	

- 5 How long have you been in your current role?

Less than 1 year	
1-2 years	
2-5 years	
5-10 years	
10+ years	

- 6 How long have you been a manager within further education?

Less than 1 year	
1-2 years	
2-5 years	
5-10 years	
10+ years	

## Recruitment

- 7 Thinking specifically about your current position, which of the following statements is most accurate?

I was an internal appointment and did not have to attend an interview.	
I was an internal appointment and attended an interview where only internal applicants were present.	
I was an internal appointment for a vacancy open to external applicants	
I was an external appointment and did not have to attend an interview.	
I was an external appointment and attended an interview prior to appointment.	
Other (please describe)	

- 8 Which statement is most accurate

Were you encouraged to apply for your current position by senior managers?

Yes	
No	
Unwilling to say	

- 9 What support did you find most helpful in making the transition to your new job?

--

## Teaching commitments

10 Do you teach on a regular basis?

Yes, 10+ hours per week	
Yes, 5-10 hours per week	
Yes, less than 5 hours per week	
Occasionally, when needed	
No	

10a If you answered 'yes' to question 9, please comment on how teaching influences your performance in your role.

--

10b If you answered 'no' to question 9, would you like to teach?

Yes	
No	
Not sure	

Please explain your answer to question 10b.

--

- 11 Were you allocated a mentor when you started your current role?

Yes	
No	
Not sure	

- 12 If you answered 'yes' to question 11, how helpful was your mentor?

--

- 13 Approximately how much training were you given for your current role (please include training that occurred either before you started or in the first few weeks)?

None	
Less than 1 day	
More than 3 days	
Unwilling to say	

- 13a Please indicate the kinds of support and training provided for your role

--

- 14 How helpful was this training?

A great help	
Helpful, but more was needed	
Of some help	
No help	
No training was given	

- 15 What are the key obstacles to the successful completion of your job? (Please circle any that apply)

Time	Managers senior to myself	Changing priorities
Lack of resources	Students	Money
Excessive workload	Staff	Lack of support
Too many meetings	Lack of clarity in the role	Emails/phone calls
Systems and processes	Culture	Lack of training
Bureaucracy	Administration	External Factors
Other: (please state)		

- 16 What are the most helpful things in the successful completion of your job? (Please circle any that apply)

Resources	Managers senior to myself	Clear priorities
Manageable workload	Other staff	Support from others
Meetings	Clarity in the role	Communications
Systems and processes	Culture	Training
Administration	External Factors	Students
Other (please state)		

- 17 What are the **best** things about your role?

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18 What are the **worst** things about your role?

19 Please add any other comments below.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Peter Wolstencroft

### **Appendix 3:** Participant Consent Form



**Information Sheet for Participants: A critical analysis of the training and support provided to new middle managers within the Post-Compulsory Education sector**

Evidence suggests that as a result of a movement to a market based approach to the management of the post-compulsory education sector, new challenges are being faced. Many of these changes have impacted on the roles and responsibilities of middle managers who have operational responsibility for subject areas.

This research project is part of a PhD qualification that is being studied at the University of Warwick looking at the support, training and role of new middle managers within the Post-Compulsory Education sector.

The specific questions being investigated are as follows:

- (1) The nature of educational management, paying particular attention to whether it is possible to identify “best practice”.*
- (2) The specific nature of operational management within the post- compulsory educational sector and what colleges are looking to achieve when appointing new managers.*
- (3) The training and support available to new managers in the sector.*
- (4) The impact of training and support (or in some cases lack of) on the organisation.*
- (5) Whether the training and support provided in other phases can be used to help new managers within the post-compulsory sector.*

**Methodology:**

Interviews will be carried out with a number of managers working both at a senior and an operational level and your permission is requested to record and analyse your responses in relation to the research objectives. Managers will be selected from a range of different sectors to ensure that good practice can be identified.

### Confidentiality and data protection

The interviews will be carried out by the researcher who will respect the confidentiality of any recorded information and provide assurance that:

- All information recorded during interviews will be used solely for the purpose of this project and will not be shared with other parties.
- The anonymity of individual participants will be protected and no participants will be directly named in any report or publication in relation to the findings of the research.

### Withdrawal from the study

You have the right to withdraw your consent or request further information about this project at any time during the research and can do so by contacting: **Peter Wolstencroft**  
[P.J.W.Wolstencroft@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:P.J.W.Wolstencroft@warwick.ac.uk)

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this project, your support will be invaluable in gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by managers in the sector.*

## **A critical analysis of the training and support provided to middle managers within the Post-Compulsory Education sector**

### *Consent Form*

Material gathered during this research will be treated as confidential and securely stored.

Please answer each statement concerning the collection and use of the research data.

	YES	NO
I have read and understand the information sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I agree to be interviewed, for the interview to be audiotaped and for its contents to be used for research purposes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 4:** Interview Schedule

## **Interview questions**

- a. Demographics
  - i. Age range- 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 65+
  - ii. Gender
  - iii. Previous experience
  - iv. Management qualification (if applicable)
  - v. Level/area of management
- b. What is your job role?
- c. How were you recruited?
- d. What are your current responsibilities?
- e. What training did you receive for the role?
- f. What training would you have liked?
- g. What sources of support are available to you?
- h. What sources of support would you like?
- i. What impact has that support and/or training had on you?
- j. What are the main obstacles in your role?
- k. Prior to taking the job, what were your expectations of the role?
- l. To what extent has your experience in the role matched your initial expectations?
- m. What strategies have you used to ensure that you can meet the demands of the job?
- n. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

- o. A number of supplemental questions were asked to each interviewee, which were informed by their answers. The only consistent supplemental questions that were asked to all participants were whether they had any regrets in taking the job and whether they would prefer to return to their previous role.